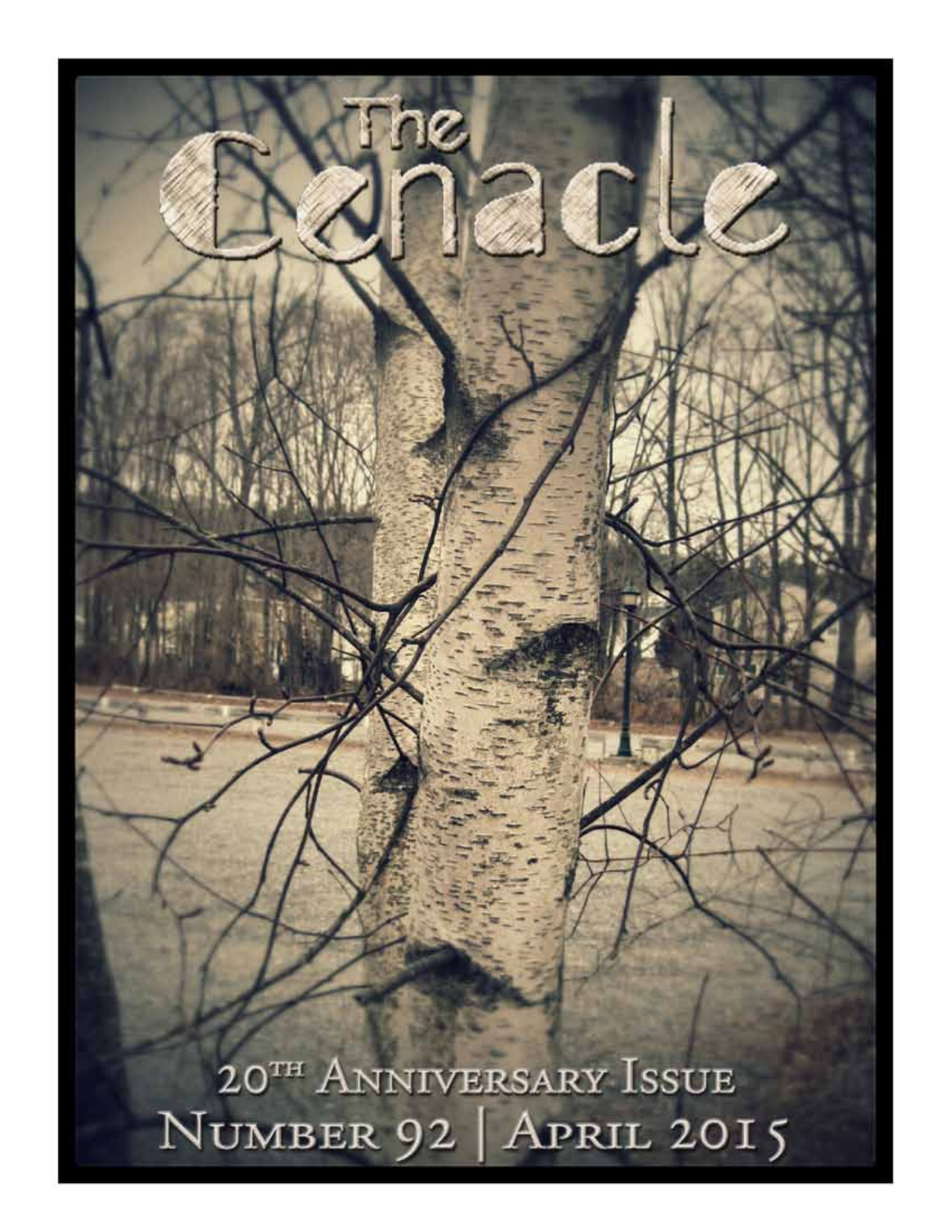
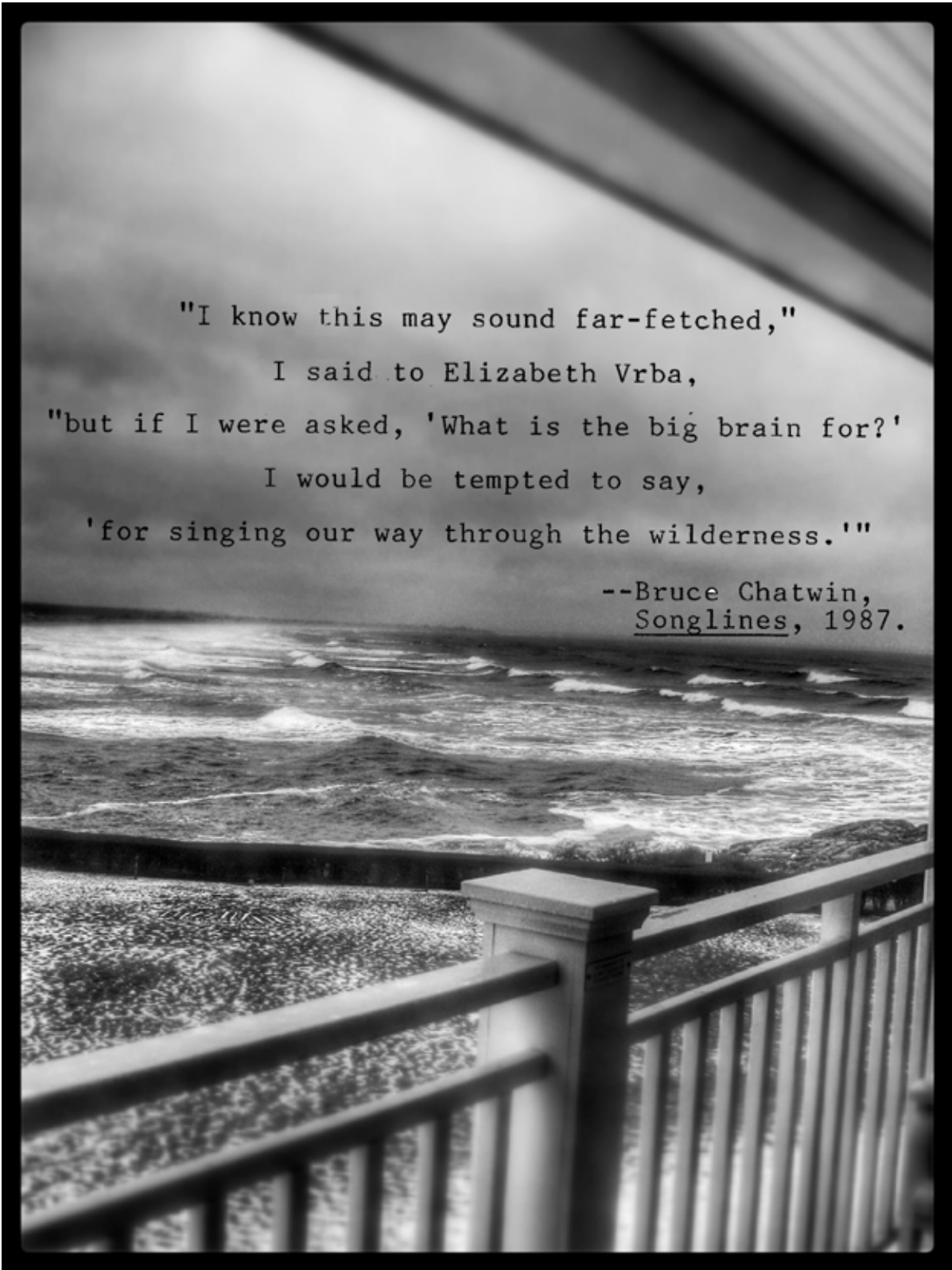




The Cenacle

20TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
NUMBER 92 | APRIL 2015



"I know this may sound far-fetched,"
I said to Elizabeth Vrba,
"but if I were asked, 'What is the big brain for?'
I would be tempted to say,
'for singing our way through the wilderness.'"

--Bruce Chatwin,
Songlines, 1987.

April 18, 2015
7:15 p.m.
Harvard Square -
Au Bon Pain Cafe -
Courtyard - my table
Cambridge, MA.

The Cenacle 20th Anniversary Note

I could not think of a better place to begin this piece meant to honor & remember 20 years of this publication.

20 years. 79 issues. About 4 a year.

Wow. I turned 31, that month of April in 1995. Bill Clinton was in his first term as President. Most didn't know ~~what~~ an "Internet" was, & phones hung on walls, handsets attached by cords to their bases.

Harvard Square hasn't changed too much. Fewer bookstores, alas, but still far more than anywhere else in metro-Boston.

This journal began in Cambridge, another good reason to write this here tonight.

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It began because I had been reading books all my life, & writing most of my life's days, & making periodicals in one form or another almost as long.

I moved from Connecticut to Boston in 1992, but had already long lived here in my heart. The best writers of my land had lived here or near here. Emerson. Thoreau. Dickinson. Hawthorne. I read their books & walked around among their words, & this area had been part of their inspiration, hosted their writing lives.

I had friends down in Connecticut I felt were artistic descendants of these greats. Melville too. Whitman.

To write their names here & now is to lament a little: those days come & passed.

But do: Bergeron, Shorette, Dillon, Burke, Heitner, Barton. Emerson.

And to add friends made in Boston, remembered: Ciccone, McLoughlin, Amante.

The list does not end here, but those were who I knew in 1995 most importantly.

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I wanted our writings together, printed, bound. I wanted our nights, glorious lucky nights, at Roma Restaurant in New Britain, Connecticut, meeting as the Jellie Literary Guild, captured, a piece, maybe the near end of it, but at least that much.

I knew, without knowing I was too right, without it having happened yet, that those days of brotherly bond in pen, guitar, drink, closeness would not go on forever.

I had to make sure that what we did was not forgotten. It was & is important.

10:07 p.m.
moved indoors -
foyer-booth

-Again, Au Bon Pain re-designs their cafe's interior, now lime-topped tables with power outlets every inch of the place. Framed nature photos lined the wall, real or facsimile plants, vaguely cactus style. Maybe that will be enough

-10-

changes for awhile.

This is the 79th issue of this journal, so essentially a quarterly for two decades. Didn't start out that way. I wanted one issue per Jellide Literary Guild meeting. Eight a year. Came close in 1995. Seven. Bottomed out in 2002. One. Released a year late, just bore the date December 2002.

More than numbers. Tonight I read through the early issues, the ones not yet scanned & readied for online archiving & distribution. Dug them here in a heavy bag of 'em.

They began with a desk copier & a couple of typewriters. And a lot of black pens. Eventually photos, artwork, fancy fonts, computer layout. I met Barbara Braynon, friend of McLoughlin's, & for half a dozen years she helped me turn a zine into a little magazine. She did amazing work on the issues, & other Scrip Press projects I concocted. I've always believed that you find the gifts of those around you, & then find a way to help those

-11-

manifest.

Held these issues in my hands, pages upon pages. Watched my writing, & those of my friends, get better, more sophisticated, subtler. Another thing that happens: Someone recognizes your gifts, you put more into them. Try things. Some of it fails, but some of it sticks. The Cenacle got better as it went along.

I'd forgotten some of this. These early issues, '95-'01, 35 issues, they're a long time ago now. I've stored & re-stored them without revisiting them. Maybe I didn't want to. A lot of their names has passed far from me.

But, 20 years. Reason to feel proud. Reason, even more, to feel grateful. To say thank you, each & every one of you. I was profoundly lucky to know you as friends, & to publish your work. Holding your pages tonight, these years far, renews my love & respect for you all.

-12-

When The Cenacle resumed in December 2003, with publication of #47, Dec. 2002, it was no longer coupled to The Jellide Literary Guild, or Roma Restaurant. Would it be again till 2008.

What I had was a few people willing to go with me on the trip. Cassandra, my developing life partner, wife, muse; Judith Hoggai, a friend I met online, here, who is Israeli; loyalists Burke & Amani from the old days, plus Barbara & Dillon came back for awhile too. These folks were most of it, plus my usual voluminous writings. Ciccone reappeared too. Emerson. It felt like continuity, especially when I dared start up the Jellide Guild in Portland, Oregon. Van Kleeck. Nemo Boko. Vaneck.

Came back to Boston in 2010, why I'm able to write this piece in this beloved joint tonight. Others appeared. Beautiful poets: Tom Sheehan, Martina Newberry, Joe Coleman. Wild prose writers: Nathan Horowitz, Charlie Beyer. Wonderful people. Wonderful artists. They each & all manifest.

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So arrive again to tonight, now,
Au Bon Pain booth, lime-green table
top.

I can only try to be true to the
trust these many friends have
placed in me to publish & distribute
their works of art. I spent today
with Kass, at this task, at creating
the issue that this piece, & its kind
goes back to 1995, precludes.

I wrote the following words 3/31/95 &
included them in #1 April 1995, &
copy them out here now by way
of renewed vow, mission statement:

"Publish a journal paid for from my
own pocket, nurture the talents and
goals of my friends within its pages
and all the Pellice Guild. I will
carry forth the tradition as I see
it in my small way. I will endeavor
to make connections on a person-by-
person basis to widen my circle.
I will retain total control of my projects
& treat my colleagues w/ respect & love."

4/18/2015, Cambridge, MA

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Dedication & Thank-ee:

- * Kassandra Dawn Souard
- * Jim Burke III
- * Jellicle Literary Guild
- * Burning Man Arts Festival & communities
- * Punk & rock roll bands everywhere & at all times
- * Girls who loved me a little, much, & not at all
- * Dr. Albert Hofmann & his miracle medicine, LSD, & its many kindred
- * Trees, Nature, the World, the Universe
- * Many makers of my black pens & yellow pads & white lined paper
- * Artists, famous, hidden, Unrealized.
- * You, reading this now. I love you.
- * I am one of many. Remember this.
- * Creatures.
- * Jobs I've had, people I've loved, people I've hurt, people I wish I could have known better or loved better.

Enough? Probably not. Over for now?
Yes.



The Cenacle

20TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
NUMBER 92 | APRIL 2015

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Assistant Editor: Kassandra Souland

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SCRIPTOR PRESS



NEW ENGLAND

2015

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- *RaiBooks* #1-8
- RS Mixes from “Within’s Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution”; &
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Thank you to everyone over the years who has contributed to, been supportive of, and/or read this periodical . . . 79 issues in 20 years is an amazing fact to behold . . . *The Cenacle’s* high quality has maintained itself by the efforts of nearly countless numbers . . . I am thrilled to arrive at this point, & vow to work as hard as ever to keep this journal great!



Colin James**Meditations on Pleasure**

A builder once told me,
between sips of lime wine,
that his preferred method
of escape was modular,
and he went on and on
to design more relationships
based on desire than
any builder I've ever known.

* * *

Night in Gaol

You sleep
like a bird,
your forehead a map—
a map of twitching veins
snapping at the air.
No flights tonight
through a crowded sky.
In the morning
the cell spins.
The voice on the phone
won't pay the fine.
Nothing to do
but wait for absolution
and plan your freedom.
Four old women
may block the sidewalk,
their hats worn recklessly.
They don't much care.

* * *

A Good Friend's Supply of Emphasis

The fairness of the fight
gradually dissipated.
Two pairs of pants,
if you include pajamas,
tucked into thick woolen socks,
thrashed your flimsy halter-top.

I had learned a side step or two
from northern based black poets—
love is the more effective when
lunging with anticipated awkwardness.

I should have kissed your purple lips
instead of consorting with a herbalist.
Charming, half empty, leather bag rich.

* * * * *

Bags End News
 No. 66 September 9, 1986
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

The Bag Lady Artist Coms to Bagzend! (Part I)

Wunce, wen me an mah frend
 Cristal ~~wer~~ wer playing marbels, wich
 I dont play 2 good cuz ~~th~~ pawz
 cant hold them a2 wel az
 fingers, in the uper levils of
 Bagzend, this old lady cam
 out of 1 of the dors. She
 askd in a veri soft voyc if
 she cood draw a pikchur
 of us. We sed O.K.

She took out of the 2
 bags she wnz ^{carying} carrying a
 bunch of colord papr an a
 shoo boxx that we saw her
 tak crayons out of. Wen she
 wnz reddy she startid her
 pikchur. She sed we cood keep



Bags End Book #1:

The Bag Lady Artist Comes to Bags End!

Introduction

Hello Cenacle readers,

Mah name is Algernon Beagle & I am the editor guy for Bags End News. Bags End News is a newspaper about mah homeland, a fantasyland called Bags End.

From the outside, Bags End looks like 3 brown-colored laundry bags piled up on a little chair in the corner of our friend Miss Chris's bedroom in Connecticut. Miss Chris is 5 years old & has a toy tall boy brother named Ramie, who is 17.

Inside, Bags End is sort of like an apartment building of levels but, cuz it is a fantasyland, nobody knows about its top or bottom. Most levels look like regular hallways, with doors to rooms & other places running up & down their lengths.

Each level is connected to the one above & the one below by ramps that are good for folks with legs & others without. Strangely, the other end of each level ends in a sudden edge, so be warned, should you come to visit.

The Cenacle editor guy, who is a cousin to my friend & Miss Chris's brother Ramie, invited me to share some of the stories from mah newspaper, now & again. He also helped with the typing & some of the spellings, to make this book presentable here. I love English but I still don't spell it too great.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy these stories from Bags End, a place near & dear to mah heartbone.

The Bag Lady Artist Comes to Bags End!

Part I.

Once, when me & mah friend Chrystal were playing marbles, which I don't play too good cuz paws can't hold them as well as fingers, in the upper levels of Bags End, this old lady came out of one of the doors. She asked in a very soft voice if she could draw a picture of us. We said OK.

She took out of the 2 bags she was carrying a bunch of colored paper & a shoe box that we saw her take crayons out of. When she was ready, she started her picture. She said we could keep playing if we wanted cuz she didn't need us to sit still.

After awhile, Chrystal, who is a girl who has nice messy brown hair & playful brown eyes, whispered to me that we should introduce ourselves.

Chrystal stood up &, when she saw the lady looking at her, she smiled & said, "My name is Chrystal & this is my friend Algernon Beagle. This place

you're in is called Bags End."

The lady smiled. "How do you do? I am called a Bag Lady cuz I don't have a real home & I carry all my things in these 2 bags. Some people make fun of you & call you names if you don't have a home, or very many things. My name is Emily, but you can call me Emmi."

I looked very closely at Emmi the Bag Lady Artist, as Sheila Bunny later called her. She wore a lot of clothes. She had on a white shirt, a green sweater, & a brown jacket. She wore brown pants, blue shoes with strings tied around her ankles, & white socks. She had some rings on her fingers & an orange hat on her head. As she drew our picture, her face looked like she was thinking about the picture & nothing else. Her face had a lot of lines in it, but I thought she looked like someone's really nice grandmother.

Chrystal asked Emmi if she would like to meet some other Bags End Friends when she finished her drawing. Emmi said that would be nice but she could only stay a little while.

Me & Chrystal first brought Emmi to visit Sheila Bunny who was in her Throne Room, chewing on a carrot & looking at a book of paintings by a guy named DaVinci. Sheila's purple eyes were glowing a little like they do when she is interested in something & paying real good attention.

Emmi went up to Sheila & said, "Is there a picture of the Mona Lisa in there?"

Sheila nodded & turned to a page which showed a picture of a lady who had a tricky smile. The Bag Lady Artist smiled in a tricky way too.

Crystal said, "Emmi, this is Sheila Bunny, who calls herself the King of Bags End even though she was only elected Mayor. Sheila, this is Emmi, who says she is a Bag Lady cuz she don't got a home & all her things are in her bags."

Sheila looked at Emmi's bags & ask her if they really had all her things in them. Emmi nodded.

"Where's your bed?"

"I don't have 1."

"But where do you sleep?"

Emmi said, "When it's night, I usually sleep anywhere that is dry & out of the open."

"But don't you have a home?" Sheila asked. She looked a little upset.

Emmi shook her head again.

Sheila closed 1 of her purple eyes & looked up at the ceiling like she always does when she is thinking real hard.

"How would you like to live in Bags End & be my Royal Artist?" she asked.

Emmi shook her head. Before Sheila could say anything, though, Emmi said, "It's not that I don't want to. I can't. You see, I grew up in a poor family. The only thing my parents could really offer me was the chance to go to school & learn how to read. My mother would take me to the public library every night, & my dad would listen to me read before bedtime. We would also go to museum on Sunday, my dad's only day off.

"I discovered my love for Art & drawing in the museum, & I would use whatever pencils or pens or crayons my parents could afford to copy the pictures I saw. I also read books about Art & drawing in the library.

"When I became a young woman, my parents died & I married a poor young man I loved a great deal, but he got sick too & died. He was never too strong, you see, & too rough a job & not enough rest or good food just killed him.

"Well, I got more & more poor cuz I could never get a good job. I didn't even go to high school, so the kind of jobs I could do weren't too great.

Finally, the day came when I was put on the street & I couldn't get another place. So I had to learn to live on the street."

Me & Sheila & Chrystal all listened pretty quietly to Emmi's story. I didn't really understand some of it, but I kept quiet.

"So why can't you stay in Bags End?" Sheila asked again.

"Well, the reason I am here is cuz of your friend, Princess Chrisakah," she said.

"Chrisakah?" we 3 said at the same time. Princess Chrisakah, or Crissy as we call her like friends, lives near Bags End in a fantasyland called Imagianna. She lives in a castle & everything, more like a regular fantasyland than weird old Bags End. Her best friend Boop, who looks like a turtle but isn't one, lives with her there too, & is kind of her servant. But Crissy gets bored & wishes she was living in nutty Bags End sometimes.

"Yes. She appeared in a dream I had 1 night. I was very cold & unhappy & I fell asleep wishing I would never wake up. Then I dreamed this beautiful girl spoke to me about a warm place where I could visit for a little while when I felt the most sad.

"She said she wished she could help me more but she couldn't. She said she hoped these visits would make me feel a little better.

"Well, I was walking down a street of the City I live in when I felt myself being drawn toward this alley between 2 buildings. There was a door in 1 of the buildings & I opened it & went through. I ended up here in Bags End, & when I saw the little girl & puppy I knew that by some miracle that dream I had had was real."

Emmi looked very tired & so Sheila begged her to stay for the night & rest in a real bed. Emmi said OK but that she had to leave the next morning cuz she was afraid Chrisakah would get mad & not let her come back.

Before she left though, our teacher Mister Owl got her to teach us about Art & drawing.

Part II.

Mister Owl got us Bags End guys & fellas up real early on the 2nd day of Emmi the Bag Lady Artist's visit.

Well, some fellas didn't like getting up even before the sun was dressed so Sheila told Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow to "deal with those troops!" Lisa is this strange little red-haired baby with bright blue eyes who talks funny & dresses up like she is a soldier. She wears this green shirt that says M*AXS*H on it. She makes us Bags End guys, especially the ones who don't smartly get away, march up & down a hallway in Bags End until she says, "Twoops, dwismissed!"

This time, Lisa marched every last Bags End Friend to a lower level of Bags End, through a door, & into a big brightly lit room. There were a lot of little tables & stools spread out all over the place. On the tables were paper & colored pencils.

Emmi came into the room with Sheila. Mister Owl asked Sheila to introduce Emmi to everyone in Bags End who hadn't met her yet.

"Everyone, this is our new friend Emmi the Bag Lady Artist. She will visit us once in awhile & I hope you all can talk to her sometimes. She has to leave soon this time. Too bad. Anyway, before she leaves she is going to teach us a little about drawing. Listen closely."

Sheila then went over & sat at a table with her little sister Margie,

who forgets the difference between cartoons on TV & real guys, & Miss Chris, who had the day off from her own school & wanted to go to Bags End School for the day.

Miss Chris lives in Connecticut with her mommy & daddy & brothers. She also has a toy tall boy called Ramie who is I guess her brother too. Ramie is also a Lazybug, which means he likes to nap a lot. This causes him no end of trouble with Miss Chris, who prefers he be awake to play with her & read good storybooks to her. She is also mah adopted person mommy cuz mah own Mommy Beagle is not around right now.

Anyway, Miss Chris was chewing bubble gum which is a little too close to real food for mah liking. I only like one secret food that nobody knows about but otherwise I say: O! Food! Yuk!

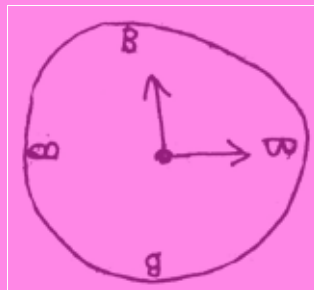
Your old buddy Algernon sat with mah brother Alexander Puppy, who only talks in his silly made-up Bump language, & that nice language-knowing & green-eyed guy Allie Leopard. We didn't say much cuz we were too busy listening to Emmi & drawing.

Emmi said, "I am glad you are all so eager to listen to an old lady. If I can teach each of you a little more about drawing than you already know, I will be happy.

"First you must understand that each of us sees things in a different way. I may like something cuz it is blue, & someone else may like it like cuz it is round. I may look at a picture of a forest & be most interested in the trees. Someone else may like the picture's clouds best. So I am not really going to tell you what to draw or how to draw anything you choose. I will give you a few hints though.

"Most things we see are made up of shapes. A TV is a square. A baseball is a circle. Other things are made of several shapes. A house is a square with a triangle on top. So when you draw something, you can get started by figuring out its shape."

Emmi then asked us to practice drawing squares, circles, triangles, & straight lines. Then she said we should try seeing how many pictures we could make by starting with a circle. I drew a tire, Allie drew a soccer ball, & mah silly brother Alexander drew a clock with Bump numbers that all looked alike except they were pointing in different directions. It looked like this:



Ally explained that Bump language has only 4 numbers for its clock. He said Alex told him it was **Bm**. Silly brother.

Emmi then asked us to draw something we really like & next time she came she would look at the drawings & help us with any questions we had.

We got upset that Emmi had to leave, but Sheila said we should give Emmi 3 cheers for visiting us.

"Yea! Emmi!
Yea! Emmi!
Yea! Emmi!"

we yelled. Sheila then told everyone to be quiet.

"Emmi, I visited Chrisakah last night when everyone had gone to bed. I asked her why you couldn't stay in Bags End cuz you don't have a home anywhere else. She told me that she doesn't have the power to let you stay in a world you're not from. Her magic is only strong enough for you to have visits.

"Well, I put on my thinking cap to try & help you anyway. Here's a bracelet that won't come off your wrist, unless you take it off by yourself. When you really need to come to Bags End, concentrate very hard on this bracelet, & it will guide your feet to bring you here. We love you, Emmi." Sheila hopped up to Emmi's face & kissed her cheek. Then Sheila & Emmi left while Mr. Owl told the rest of us we could work on our drawings all day.

When I went to bed that night, I thought about Emmi having no home to go to. I don't really know a lot about why some people in the United States don't have homes. Miss Chris says there are even people in other countries that die cuz they don't have homes or food to eat.

Sheila says, "The world is far from perfect, kid."

Sometimes you have to keep asking a question even if there is no answer.

I hope Emmi comes back soon.

The Journey to the Top of Bags End!

Part I.

When summer was near to ending, I asked Sheila, the Bunny King Among Other Things, if she was looking forward to school.

"Well," Sheila said, "I like learning to read better but I have other things to do. If only school could be just 2 or 3 hours for 2 or 3 days a week." I like her thinking.

Anyway, Bags End was pretty quiet except for when then nice fella Emmi the Bag Lady Artist visited. I like Emmi!

Then I noticed that at school Sheila would spend a lot of time looking up at the ceiling with 1 of her purple eyes closed. She's thinking real hard when she does that. 1 time Oliver called on her to answer a question & she was so busy thinking that she said, "Bug off, Owl!" Mister Owl got so upset that Sheila had to apologize. Sheila tries to be nice to him when he's teaching.

Finally, I went to see Sheila in her Mayor's Office to ask her what was wrong. She was doing her paperwork. I don't know why, but she has a lot of it to do to keep Bags End running smoothly.

"I hate paperwork," she kept muttering over & over & over again.

"Sheila?" I asked.

"Ah, a loyal subject," she said.

"Sheila, I was wondering if anything was wrong."

"Well. O, all right, I will tell you, Beagle. Might as well get 1 story right in that news rag of yours."

"Hey!" I yelled.

"Just kidding, kid."

"Well, what's wrong?"

"I have been thinking about taking another trip," she said.

"To where?" I asked.

Sheila smiled in a tricky way. "I think I am going to lead an expedition to the top of Bags End!" She looked at me like I was supposed to say wow! or

Bags End News
 No. 68 September 23, 1986
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

THE JERNY TO THE TOP OF BAGS END!!! (Part I.

Wen Camp Buny endid in August, I asked Shlela, the Buny King Among Othr Things, if she wuz looking for werd 2 skool.

"Well, Shlela sed, I lik lerning to reed bettr but I hav othr things to do. IF onli skool cood be jest 2 or 3 hors ~~or~~ ^{for} 2 or 3 days a week." I lik her thinking.

Enyway, Bags End wuz prity kwiet xcept for thos dum Shlela Snaks (O! yuk! an wen that nic fella Emmi the Bag Ladi Artist vizitid. I lik Emmi!

something. Instead I said, "What's an expedition?"

"A trip, dummy. A trip!" Sheila don't got much patience.

For the next few days, no one in Bags End seemed to talk about anything but Sheila's big trip to the top of Bags End.

1 day, me & my friend Leona Lion & Sheila Bunny were in the Throne Room. Leona is a really nice lion cub with pretty brown eyes & fur. Me & her were looking at a picture book called Beagles All Over the World & Sheila was reading a book about trips to the North Pole. Then Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow marched in & saluted Sheila.

"Gweneral Shweila, swer, I respwectfwully request thwat the Army of the Bwabys be twaken on thwis dangerous mwission to the unexplored upper regions of Bwags End."

Before I could open mah mouth to ask, Sheila explained that Lisa wanted the Baby Army to go on the trip she was planning.

"Sure, Sargent, the Army can come. Go prepare for the trip. Dismissed."

Sargent Lisa saluted again & left quietly. But we heard her outside the room yelling, "O! Gwoody! Gwoody! I get to go on the twip! Gwoody! Gwoody!" Silly Sargent.

So many guys & fellas were bugging Sheila to let them go on the trip that Sheila finally announced that anyone who wanted to could come, but she warned that she wouldn't wait if someone got tired, & she really didn't know what they would find.

So 1 fine Saturday morning Sheila led a whole bunch of us guys & fellas up the ramps to the upper levels. I tried to figure out who all was in the crowd & saw at least Sheila Bunny, Betsy Bunny Pillow, Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow, Alexander Puppy, Leona Lion, Miss Chris, Ramie, Allie Leopard, & quite a few puppies.

Now someone might ask me: aren't you a puppy, Algernon? Good question, & I would answer: sort of yes. But, see, I don't really speak Puppy language, all them barks & woofs & stuff, cuz I prefer English.

So for that reason, I am not a member of the Secret Puppy Club. I also don't have a taste for Puppy Cookys like the rest. O! Yuk! And while Sheila sometimes has Puppy Guards by her side when she is being all King-like, I stay away from all that. So: sort of yes. My brother Alexander is another sort of yes puppy--I mean he is tall & yellow & sort of puppy-shaped & all--but I think even less than me.

After climbing 3 or 4 ramps, we were on a level of Bags End most of us hadn't been on before.

Sheila didn't stop though. She said that she had already gone a lot higher up than this. So we kept going, Sheila hopping at the head of the line.

Someone said we should sing a song as we marched. So we sang:

To Bags End, to Bags End
Have you ever been
to Bags End?

It's this crazy
funny sunny place

It's a honey
of a place

To Bags End, to Bags End
Have you made some
Friends in Bags End

There's pillows that talk
And beagles that yawp
And a bunny king
And a marching baby
Have you met them, maybe?

O Bags End, Bags End
A place you won't forget
To Bags End, to Bags End
To there you better soon get!

To Bags End, to Bags End
A place you'll love to know!
To Bags End, to Bags End,
To there you better go!

I think Ramie wrote that song, cuz he has a lot of notebooks & pens & things, but I am not sure.

We soon reached a level in Bags End that was very different from the is most of us knew. Instead of doors on either side of the hallway, there was nothing but sky!

Sheila looked back at everyone, smiled a tricky smile, & yelled, "Tally ho!" as she jumped right into the sky!

Part II.

For a second, nobody moved or said anything. Then everybody started talking all at once. Leona tried to leap after Sheila but some puppies held her back. Sargent Lisa ordered us guys in the Army of the Babys to "save the King!" but everyone just said, "forget it, Sarge!"

Just as a lot of trouble was gonna happen, we heard, "Looking for someone?" & we saw Sheila floating in the sky behind us on the other side of the hallway!

"Don't worry, guys, your King is all right," she said.

"Who was worried?" asked a whispery voice that sounded like Betsy Bunny Pillow's.

Betsy is one of the strangest Friends in Bags End. She is a Pillow, which is not strange, but she talks, which is. Betsy came to Bags End a long time ago as an escapee from a place called the Bunny Pillow Farm, which is run by Farmer Jones. Jones grows Bunny Pillows in big fields, & then sells them off to rich people, which drives Betsy crazy.

She is called a Bunny Pillow cuz she bounces when she goes along, & also maybe cuz her Pillow case dress has pictures of bunnies on it. Her voice is only a whisper, but you better not ignore her or you risk getting smothered.

Betsy leads a shadowy group called the Allies, who I don't really know much about except Betsy is their leader & they always help her try to attack the Bunny Pillow Farm to liberate it. And always fail so far.

Sheila continued. "I discovered this level awhile ago. I don't really understand it but for some reason you can float in the sky here. You can't really fly though, unless you have wings. If you wave your arms or paws like you are swimming, then you can move around."

This time, Leona gave a shout & leaped into the sky & nobody stopped her. It took awhile but 1 by 1 us guys & fellas stepped off into the sky. I saw mah silly brother Alexander bumping into clouds. Some other guys were playing tag & then hide-&-go-seek.

Soon the only fellas left who weren't in the sky were Ramie & your old buddy Algernon. We were still kind of scared. Ramie thought maybe the whole thing was some kind of trick by Sheila & Betsy.

Then, when we weren't looking, some tricky fella sneaked up behind us & pushed us into the sky! I closed mah eyes but I opened them again when I didn't feel mahself falling.

Floating in the air is sort of like being on the ground but, like Sheila said, you can move up & down if you wave your arms or paws. It's sort of like swimming except you don't get wet & you don't have to hold your breath.

We floated around & had a lot of fun. I wished the Blondys were around but they were lost somewhere. The Blondys are these three little blonde-haired magic girls named Tammy, Sammy, & Simi. They float even in regular Bags End cuz they don't know the Law of Grabitee. They also help to make the grumpier guys in Bags End behave when their tricky plans go too far.

Finally, Sheila hopped back onto the hallway, & most everyone else followed, cuz Sheila said she wouldn't wait for anyone on this trip. I think some people stayed cuz when I looked at who went up to the next level, some guys weren't there.

Sheila didn't stop at the next few levels & some of us guys were getting tired. Some people were even hungry. Not your old buddy Algernon of course.

So finally Miss Chris told Sheila. Instead of getting upset, Sheila smiled another tricky smile & said we would rest on the next level.

She brought us through a door in that level. There was nothing to see except swirling colors everywhere. The ground felt soft under mah paws & I think Sheila must have heard me wishing in mah head cuz she told us to sit down anywhere & relax.

The funny part about that place was that, though we were only there for a few minutes, when we left Sheila said, "I bet all of you feel like you just slept for a long time & ate a big meal."

Everyone, even your old unhungry buddy Algernon said Sheila was right.

"Good. This place is great for a long journey. Well, let's go."

Sheila led the way to the ramp going to the next level.

"Up until now, we have been traveling in a part of Bags End which I have already explored. I really don't know what we are going to see from here on," Sheila said.

I tried again to figure the guys & fellas who were still on the journey. I saw at least Sheila, Betsy, Lisa, Alexander, Leona, Miss Chris, Ramie, & Allie. A lot of guys didn't want to keep going but I didn't write who they were cuz they don't want people to call them scaredy-cats.

Sheila kept hopping up some more levels. She said she wouldn't stop until she saw something interesting.

Then, for the first time, we met people none of us had ever seen before.

Sheila saw them first cuz she was at the head of the line. She entered the next level & yelled, "Hey!" The rest of us stepped onto that level & saw 1 of the weirdest things I have ever seen in Bags End.

The level we were on wasn't a hallway with doors on both sides. It looked like a junkyard. There was a fire burning & it looked like someone was camping out.

Then we saw all these old men holding big sticks. 1 of them stepped forward. He shook his stick & said, "This is our territory! He gave it to us & we don't let anybody on it without our permission! Now git or we'll thrash you good!"

Well, some of us guys were about to git when Sheila cried, "No! Nobody orders me around in Bags End! We're going to thrash you!"

Part III.

When Sheila told those old guys threatening us with the sticks that she was gonna thrash them, I was afraid a big fight was gonna happen. It didn't cuz the biggest old guy told the others to put down their sticks & then he stepped forward.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" he demanded.

"My named is Sheila Ragut Bunny & I am the King of Bags End. These are some of my loyal followers," said Sheila as she pointed at the rest of us. Me & Ramie were hiding behind a pile of trash.

"You can't be Sheila. He said you're a myth."

"I am a myth. Myth Chris," said that silly person mommy of mine.

"But, but, you're all just pretend! He said so!"

Sheila nudged Betsy. "Are you just pretend?" Sheila asked her.

"Certainly not!" Betsy whispered.

The head old guy looked worried & the other old guys were slowly backing away.

"Swer? May I have pwermission to interrogwate thwese individuals?" asked Lisa.

"Of course, Sargent," said Sheila. She smiled in a tricky way like she knew what was gonna happen.

"OK, you guys. Stwand up! Straight line! No moving in the wanks! No, not you, Swub-Pwivates Ramie & Algernon!"

Me & Ramie sat down again.

"Fwerst, name, wank, & serial number!"

"O! Cereal! Yuk!" I yelled.

"Kwiet, Bweagleface!"

The old guys told Lisa their names but said they didn't have a rank. 1 of them said he didn't like cereal.

Miss Chris & Sheila were rolling around on the ground & laughing. I wasn't laughing cuz I didn't know Lisa wasn't talking about food. O! Yuk!

Finally, Lisa got them to tell us who they were. It seems they really didn't know how they got to Bags End, but some mysterious guy had told them they could live safely where they were. They knew about Sheila & Miss Chris from some Bags End comic books they had found.

The biggest old guy said he had asked the mysterious person if Sheila & Miss Chris were real, & he had said no.

"He said he was the head guy & that the Bags End in the comic books were just a story."

"If I see that mysterious guy, I will make him myth his teeth," said Betsy.

"He will myth not bweing in the bwig," muttered Lisa.

"I would like to meet this guy. Can you take me to him?" asked Sheila.
 "No. We don't want to leave this place. We're safe. You're not going kick us out, are you?" The old guys looked worried.

Sheila shook her head. "Just remember who your Emperor is!" she said.

"Long live Emperor Sheila!" the old guys yelled.

I heard 1 old guy say, "I thought she was the King?"

Sheila told everyone to come along but some of the fellas like Ramie & Ally said they were tired & wanted to go home. They even said they didn't care if I wrote their names in mah newspaper. So me, Alexander, Betsy, Lisa, & Miss Chris left those guys & followed Sheila to the next level.

Sheila kept hopping & she kept saying she wanted to meet the guy who said he was the head guy.

I got tired of being quiet so I asked Miss Chris what she thought was at the top of Bags End.

"Maybe there's a bubble gum treasure!" she said. She is a big fan of bubble gum. Sometimes she sticks her old used-up bubble gum over the edge of Bags End.

"O! Yuk!" I yelled.

"How about a Pillow sanctuary?" said Betsy.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A place where Bunny Pillows can go so they won't get picked & sold to rich people," she said.

"Bump Bump-Bump Bump?" asked mah brother Alex.

"Speak English, silly brother," I said.

"He said maybe the top of Bags End is a province of Bags End where they speak Bump language," said Miss Chris. Ally has been teaching her Bump.

"Well, whatever is up thwere, I fweel we should claim it in the name of Bwags End," said Lisa.

Sheila had been listening to all this talk & now she finally spoke. "I don't even know if there really is a top to Bags End. I asked Chrisakah & she didn't know. I asked the Blondys cuz they get lost all over Bags End, but they never told me about some guy who thinks he runs Bags End."

"What do you want to be at the top?" Miss Chris asked me.

I thought for a second. "I don't know. We've been having so many fun adventures on this journey that I don't really want them to end."

Sheila had just reached the next level. She told us she wanted to go to the end of the hallway to see what the edge of Bags End looks like from this level.

So all us guys went down to the end. Sheila said there was no bubble gum over the edge to be seen, & Miss Chris laughed mischievously.

I looked out past the edge of Bags End, & as usual I saw only black space. But then I saw something else.

It was a face & it was getting bigger.

I AM THE GUARDIAN OF THIS REALM.

YOU ARE INTRUDERS.

GO BACK OR RISK MY ANGER.

Me & Alex were already going back when Sheila told us to stop.

"My name is Sheila Bunny & I am the King of Bags End. Bags End was started cuz of me & Miss Chris & Chrisakah. This is the home of the Bags End Friends. NOONE tells me to leave ANY PART OF BAGS END!"

Sheila was mad. Her little body was tense & she looked ready to beat up someone.

The face, which had looked like a man's face, started changing shape. Pretty soon it looked like a girl's face. It was Princess Chrisakah!

"Crissy!" Sheila said. "What was all that Guardian of the Realm junk?"

"Sheila, you are a very special bunny. I have watched you on this journey. I know that you are curious but curiosity requires courage. I had to see if you were strong enough & courageous enough to meet a challenge to your leadership."

"Humf!" muttered Sheila. "You read too many fantasy stories, Crissy."

Crissy smiled & then faded from sight.

"Well, let's go," Sheila said.

"Do you think it was Crissy that those old guys were scared of?" Miss Chris asked.

"Probably. Crissy has a really active imagination. She gets bored & she reads all these silly books that give her ideas," said Sheila.

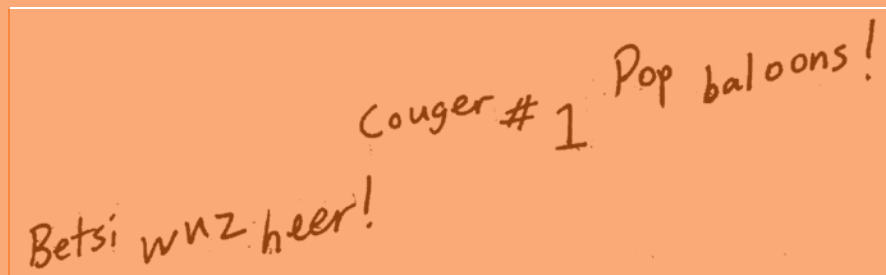
Sheila told us it was time to get going. This time we went up a lot of levels cuz Sheila was anxious to get to the top of Bags End.

It had been a long time since we had been at that place that makes you feel rested. Miss Chris asked Sheila if we could stop awhile. Sheila said OK.

While us guys were resting, Sheila was already investigating the ramp to the next level. Alexander was explaining something in Bump language to Miss Chris. Lisa & Betsy were arguing about who was better, Betsy's Allies or the Bags End Army. I walked over to Sheila & saw that the ramp to the next level was moving like a escalator. It was really steep & I couldn't even see the top of it.

Finally, Sheila told everyone to stop resting & start journeying.

We got on the ramp & slowly went up. I was a little scared until Miss Chris held 1 of mah paws. Mah silly brother thought it was fun & he kept bumping Sheila who told him to "bump off!" Betsy kept writing things on the wall:



After awhile I could see the top of the moving ramp. It looked like a part of the sky but it was purple. Lori told me later the color I saw was lavender.

When we got to the top we found it was night-time & we were in a big city. Miss Chris & Sheila read a sign that said BOULEVARD that Sheila said is a kind of big street.

We started walking along the BOULEVARD & suddenly things started to happen. There was strange music in the air & we saw people & other things dancing in front of stores. 1 creature was dancing while this girl with long blonde hair & a purple dress was playing a 2-level piano with both her hands & feet. The creature kept changing shape as the music changed. When the music was soft & sweet, the creature was blobby & danced slowly. When the music was loud & fast, the creature got all pointy & the bottom part of him danced on the ground & the top part of him danced in the air. I bet the Blondys would have liked him.

Then we heard some more loud music & down the street came marching

the weirdest parade I ever saw.

First came a moving Forest. It had trees & bushes & birds & everything & the whole Forest was moving together. I got excited cuz I saw some of mah friends the Weeds in the Forest. I waved to them & they waved back & called, "Hi, King Algernon!" I seem to be the Weeds' only friend, since most just want to whack them down. I try to defend them whenever I can.

Then came a singing group that was standing on a platform that just seemed to float along. 1 of the songs they sang was in Bump language & I thought mah silly brother Alexander was gonna have a heart attack he got so excited. It was a nice song. Sort of.

Betsy got excited net cuz the marchers that followed were sort of a Lollipop Army (O! Yuk!) They looked like people except their skin & hair were all different colors. The costumes they wore had lots of decorations & were pretty. Instead of carrying guns they carried big lollipops! O! Yuk!

They formed a long line facing Betsy & us other guys & fired a 21-gun salute of candy (O! Yuk!) & bubble gum (O! Yuk!) & carrots (O! Yuk!). All this yukky stuff came out of the end of their lollipop sticks (O! Yuk!). Lisa muttered they were "thwe most unpwofessional gwoup of twoops I have encountered in my whole mwilitary caweer!"

After the parade, Miss Chris asked Sheila if we could visit some of the stores. Sheila said, "Sure thing, kid!" & off we went. The weirdest store was this place where there were books & posters & records all about Bags End. There was 1 guy in the store who came up to me & said he loved mah Algernon costume.

"I'm not wearing a Algernon costume!" I said.

"You even imitate his funny accent great!" the guy said. "Say, you want to go to a coffee shop & talk?"

"O! Coffee! Yuk!" I yelled & ran away.

"Say, you should enter a Imitate Bags End Friends Contest. You'd win easy!" he called after me.

We went into a record store & Sheila got excited about all the jazz records she saw. She likes Miles Davis especially. Miss Chris went to look at some jumpy Olivia Newton-John records. Lisa was looking at some John Phillip Sousa marching records. Betsy looked at the John Cougar rock & roll records. Alexander stayed with me cuz there weren't any Bump records. He was still humming that Bump song while I looked at some records of funny songs by mah old buddies Men at Work.

Sheila finally said we should continue our journey. It was strange that when we went back the way we had come, things looked different & we didn't see the stores we had gone into.

Trying to get to the next level was tricky cuz instead of 1 level to go up there were a whole mess. Miss Chris counted up to 12 & there were still more. We went up one level after another & then something strange happened.

At the next level we reached we heard music like the kind Angy Pudding's Applephone makes. Sheila went to the door it was coming from & what-do-you-know? It was Angy playing a song for her sisters & cousins! They are all really nice red-haired girls who live in a sort of tribe together in Bags End. Angy's Applephone is a jazz horn made from apples. You won't see its like anywhere else!

It turned out we were back at the part of Bags End where we all live. Betsy Bunny Pillow complained that Sheila had led us all that way only to end up where we had started.

There might have been a fight but just then a whole bunch of guys came along that heard we were home, & we were too busy telling everyone

everything that had happened for anybody to fight.

Sheila said she's gonna try to get to the top of Bags End again some day.

I think that sometimes it's more fun trying to get somewhere than when you really get there.

The Season of Lights!

Part I.

There was a lot of trouble 1 day in Bags End. It all started out when Mister Owl got sick.

Well, with our teacher out sick, us guys & fellas had a day off from school. Everyone was real happy until we started arguing about how to use the day off.

That silly Sargent Lisa wanted the Bags End Army to go on troop maneuvers. That means marching a lot.

Leo the Dark Man, who used to be a bad guy but now is the Janitor of Bags End, said he was gonna spend the day in his corner reading Action Man comic books, but Sheila wanted him to scrape Miss Chris's bubble gum off the side of Bags End. Leo said, "Forget it, minute presence!"

Sheila got mad & hopped to her Throne Room to find her Puppy Guards so she could have Leo drawn & quartered. Instead, she found Betsy slouched down in her throne, looking at a new plan to attack the Bunny Pillow Farm.

"Take off, Pillow!" she yelled.

"Go plant some crabgrass!" yelled Betsy in her whispery voice.

Well, Sheila was really mad & she was gonna look for her Puppy Guards somewhere else when she crashed into Alexander coming into her Throne Room.

"Bump!" Alex said.

"Listen, you idiot, if you don't move, I will have you thrown in the dungeon!" Sheila screamed.

"Bump-Bump-Bump!" said Alex sadly & he sat down to suck his toe like he does when he's sad.

Sheila hopped over him & went down the hallway. She came into the Bunny Family's apartment's TV room. Sheila & her family live there, along with your old pal Algernon Beagle & mah silly brother Alexander.

Me & mah friends Margie & Allie were watching some Bugs Bunny cartoons.

"Where are my Puppy Guards?" she demanded.

"Probably at a Puppy Club meeting eating Puppy Cookys," said Allie.

"O! Yuk!" I yelled.

"Bug Bunny!" said Margie & she hopped over to hug Sheila.

"Get away from me, bunny, ya bug me!" grumbled Sheila.

Well now Margie started crying.

Sheila left.

In another part of Bags End, the Blondys were having problems. Their old enemy Tanya had come to bother them & was chasing them around trying to kick them in their knees.

I don't know why they are enemies since the Blondys are nice to everyone. Some just seem made of trouble down in their bones. I guess that Tanya is like that.

Miss Chris & Ramie were having an argument in Miss Chris's bedroom outside Bags End. Miss Chris kept complaining about him being a Lazybug.

Bags End News
 No. 80 December 16, 1986
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

The Seesun of Lites! (Part I.

Thereer wuz a lot of trubbl
 1 day in Bagzend. It awl
 startid out wen Mister Owl
 got sick.

Wel, with our teechr out
 1 day, awl us gys had a
 day awff from skool. Evrywun
 wuz reel hapy until we startid
 arguing about how to uze the
 1 day awff.

That sily Sargent Lisa
 wantid the Bagzend Armi to
 go on troop manoeovers. That
 meens marching a lot.

Leo sed he wuz gonna
 spend the day reeding comik
 books but Shlela wantid him
 to scrap bubbl gum awff the sid

Well, everybody was fighting & some were crying & it looked like it would never end when suddenly a strong wind blew through Bags End & in Miss Chris's bedroom. The wind was so strong that all anyone could do was hold on tight to something & wait for what would happen next.

A voice in the wind began to call:

"She-ei-ei-la," it called. "Sheila!"

Sheila was sitting on her BunnyCycle, waiting for the wind to stop. Her BunnyCycle is Sheila's really fast way of getting around Bags End or wherever else she wants to go. It's like a motorcycle but bunny-shaped. One-of-a-kind, ya know.

"Here I am," she said. "Is that you, Crissy?"

"Yes," said Crissy. "It's time for the Season of Lights!"

"Really?" asked Sheila. "But Mr. Owl, our teacher, is sick. I wouldn't want him to miss out."

"O, he won't," said Crissy with a tricky voice. "You see, I told him to pretend to be sick so all of you would have a day off from school. Then, when I saw how everyone was fighting, I realized I was right in having the Season of Lights begin today."

"Hmm, that Oliver is trickier than I thought," Sheila gruttered.

"I think it would be best if you call all of the Bags End Friends together & explain what you & I discussed about the holiday season. This way, they will understand how the Season of Lights came to be."

"Good idea," said Sheila. "I think I also have some apologizing to do."

So Sheila called a meeting for everyone in Bags End, including Ramie & Miss Chris, to attend. When we were all there in the Bags End Auditorium, Sheila hopped on stage & started to talk.

"This year in Bags End we are going to celebrate a new holiday called the Season of Lights. The Season of Lights came about in this way: I was watching TV & all I kept seeing were these commercials telling children that what this time of year is about is asking your parents or Santy Claus to buy you toys or games. Nothing else. I know that people go to pray a lot this time of year, but there's more to it all than telling how much you love Godd.

"You have to recall how much you have, how lucky you are to have people who love you & who you love. We are very in lucky in Bags End. We are warm & safe & dry. But can we forget our friend Emmi who doesn't even have a home except when she visits here? I say no! We have to remember all year round what some people save for December."

"Hi, Bug Bunny!" yelled Margie from the audience.

"Hi, kid," said Sheila.

"Now, to make a long speech a little shorter--"

"Too late," muttered someone who sounded like Betsy.

"I want you all to think of something special you can give of yourself, & get ready. Princess Crissy will be calling us very soon." And with that Sheila left the stage.

So we all waited. I didn't know how Crissy would tell us, but when she did, she made it very clear it was time for the Season of Lights.

Part II.

After Sheila's speech about the Season of Lights, everybody went to different places in Bags End to wait for Crissy's signal that the holiday had started.

I was listening to a Men at Work record on Miss Chris's record player in the Bunny Family's living room when I noticed the air was turning different colors. First it turned red, then green, blue, orange, purple, & yellow.

So I went looking around & saw the same thing was happening everywhere else.

Then I heard music in the air. It was a song. The words went like this:

The Season of Lights is
upon us again

And our breath puffs
out white

And I wonder again:
what's it all for?

Why do we give gifts &
smiles more freely now
than in March or July?

But when I look at the
lights in the sky

And the lights
on the tree

And the candles
burning brightly

Maybe I wish that
it happened more often

But mostly I'm glad
that it happens at all.

As I listened to the song, I felt mahself being gently pulled along. I could have stopped if I wanted to but I didn't. Soon I saw a lot of other Bags End guys all going toward this 1 door. The funny thing was that the door was where the edge of that level was supposed to be.

When everyone was inside, the door shut & we all looked around. There was a long ramp not far from us. I saw Sheila but she wasn't leading anyone, she was waiting.

She was waiting for Princess Crissy. Crissy came along & she brought Miss Chris & Ramie with her. Miss Chris & Crissy are some kind of twins. I could tell Crissy from Miss Chris cuz Crissy was wearing her favorite shirt which says: "I'd Rather Be in Bags End." Her hair is longer too right now, cuz Miss Chris just got a haircut.

Crissy led the way up the long ramp with Miss Chris, Ramie, & the rest of us Bags End guys behind her.

We reached the top of the ramp & saw that at the top were these 4 big trees with lights on them instead of leaves.

We passed between the Light Trees & found a Fountain of Light in which liquid light flowed instead of water. I would have liked to stop & look at

these things but Crissy led us further along.

I noticed that some music was in the air & getting louder.

I heard Miss Chris mumble, "I have heard that music somewhere before."

"It's the Nutcracker music by Tchaikovsky!" Ramie said excitedly. Tchaikovsky is one of his favorite Lazybug composers to nap along with.

We next came to what looked like a small square house with a door in it. At a time we entered & when it was mah turn, I went in & found myself dancing with the Faerie Lights. They kept changing shape so I can't really describe them but what made me want to dance was their laughter. It was like music & it was beautiful. I found it hard to leave.

When everyone had gone into the House of Faerie Lights, Crissy led us into a clearing. All around the clearing, candles bigger than Ramie burned brightly. At 1 end was a tree that was lighted up by lots of colored lights.

"Now, friends, we should sit around in a circle & share with each other the gifts we have brought," Crissy said.

Sheila started. "I thought a lot about what to give. This is a present from Sheila's Kool Bag End Jazz Band."

Sheila, Miss Chris, Angy Pudding, & the rest of the band took out some instruments that Sheila had brought along. Then they played this pretty song without words.

When they were done, mah brother Alexander got up & said a poem in Bump Language. Allie stood next to him & said the words in English:

Bump Bump Bump Bump-Bump Bump!	(When I bump you it's just my way to say hi!
Bump-Bump Bump-Bump Bump-Bump-Bump Bump Bump-Bump Bump Bump-Bump Bump-Bump?	(I laugh when some people say Bump They want to say how do you do?
Bump Bump Bump Bump Bump Bump Bump Bump Bump Bump!	(What they really say is my nose just turned blue!
Bump-Bump-Bump Bump Bump Bump-Bump Bump Bump	(Do you want to learn Bump? You don't have to be smart
Bump Bump Bump Bump!	(You just need a laughing song in your heart!)

Part III.

Since there are a lot of guys in Bags End, there were a lot of presents shared at the Season of Lights.

Betsy promised that her Allies would always protect Bags End from outside enemies.

Denny & Corey Puppy gave a really great Earplane show. Denny sits up straight & Corey is upside-down below him with his ears feathered out, & they soar up high into the air! Their last trick was to fly in between the big candles that surrounded us.

Me & mah friends the Weeds sang that song called "To Bags End, to Bags End."

There were so many presents I can't list them all cuz I want room for what happened next!

When the last present was shared, Princess Crissy told everyone to find a partner cuz we were all gonna play a brand new game called The Bubble War. Crissy explained how she had made up the game.

"I was sitting on my throne in Imagianna 1 day, bored as usual. My friend Boop brought me some storybooks but I didn't want to read. Boop even suggested we play hide-&-seek which he doesn't like cuz I always win. I didn't want to do that either.

"Then I remembered the jar of bubbles Ramie & Miss Chris had given me on my birthday.

"I took them out & started blowing bubbles. I had even more fun blowing them at Boop who was a little spooked by them.

"Then I thought of this game I could play with Boop & the bubbles. You sit facing someone & take turns blowing bubbles at each other. The first one to blow 10 bubbles that land on the other person wins. I call the game The Bubble War.

"The best thing about The Bubble War is that it is the only kind of war I know about where nobody can get hurt & everyone has fun."

So all us guys & fellas chose partners & Crissy handed out the bubble jars & wands.

Mah partner was mah silly bumping brother Alexander. I kept having to tell him that you aren't supposed to bump & blow bubbles at the same time. He won our Bubble War game, 10-9. Silly brother.

Just as the Bubble War games ended, it started to snow. I like snow cuz it's pretty & it tickles when it falls on mah fur.

We all watched & played in the snow for a while. Then we heard bells jingling in the distance. Looking up in the sky we saw a sled pulled by 9 tiny reindeer. The reindeer in front had a bright red nose. Rudolph!

The sled landed near us & there was that nice little fat guy Santy Claus! He lifted up this big bag out of the sled & gave every Bags End Friend a present.

Then Sheila gave Santy Claus a present. She had Pat her mommy cook up some Sheila Snacks for Santy (O! Yuk!). He liked them a lot. "I get tired of always getting milk & cookies," he said. (O! Yuk!)

"But what about Crissy?" a lot of people asked.

Santy shook his head. "I am afraid I have nothing for her that she couldn't use her magic to make herself."

Sheila said, "But, Santy, she made the Season of Lights as a present for me & all the Bags End Friends. Can't we give her something in return?"

Santy thought hard. Then he smiled. "I think what Crissy really wants is what you already give her. Your friendship. You give her a reason to make

things with her magic. I think that if you always be her friends, that will be all the present she could ever want. Right, Crissy?" he asked.

Crissy had listened quietly to all this, but now she smiled & nodded her head. All us guys crowded around her to give her kisses, hugs, & pats.

What a great holiday!

Sheila Searches for the Bag Lady Artist

Part I.

This is kind of a hard story to write down & I don't really understand most of it. Sheila said, "Maybe sometime I will explain it to you, kid."

Sheila said 1 day she was playing checkers in Imagianna with Princess Chrisakah. Crissy was wearing a shirt with a picture of mah brother Alexander & the world "Bump!" on it.

Well, Crissy kept winning the checkers games, which she almost never does, usually, & she asked Sheila if anything was wrong.

"Of course not. I'm just letting you win so that when I trounce you later it will be all the more humiliating."

"Sheila, I know when you're not being honest. Your purple eyes start turning blue."

Sheila stared at the checkers board for a while. "I haven't seen my friend Emmi the Bag Lady Artist in a long time. I thought she would have visited Bags End by now. I'm worried about her, Crissy. I miss her."

"Would you like me to transport her to Bags End?"

"No!" Sheila almost yelled. "She's seen my life. I want to see hers."

"Sheila, I don't think a small bunny would have too good a time of it in the City."

"I don't want to have a good time. She doesn't have a good time! I want to go, Crissy!" Sheila was practically crying, something she never does.

Crissy stood up. "Very well, Sheila. But you must let me give you some protection. I will transform you into a person, & I will keep a constant watch on you."

Sheila told me later she was waiting for Crissy to take out a magic wand or something. Sheila waited, but all Crissy did was smile.

"Well? I want to go right away, Crissy," Sheila said.

"You're all ready," Crissy said.

Sheila looked down at herself & wow! She wasn't a short purple-eyed bunny anymore. She had a person's body! She had fingers! No fur! On her head was this long stringy stuff. Then she remembered that it was called hair. Her clothes felt mostly too big & there were so many of them!

"Well, how do you feel?" Crissy asked.

"So this is what it's like to be a person."

"Personally, I would rather be a beagle," said Crissy.

"You always were a little strange," Sheila smiled. She told me it felt weird having a nose-bone that wasn't so tiny you could hardly see it.

Crissy stopped smiling & began to look serious again. "Sheila, I have my doubts about this. But you are about the most ornery one I know, & this is the safest way for you to do what you're going to do anyway. I promise not to pull you back too soon, but if you get in trouble, I will have you back here before you know it. Take care." She gave Sheila a hug & Sheila thought it was strange & rather nice that she had long arms to hug Crissy back.

"Well, goodbye," Sheila said as Crissy pointed out the giant glowing

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 King: Sheila Bunny
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

Shlela Serches for the Bag Lady Artist (Part I.

This iz kind of a hard story
 to rite down an I reely dont
 undrstand most of it. Shlela sed,
 "Maybe sum^{thin} I wil eksplane
 it to yu, kid.

Shlela sed 1 day she wuz
 playing chekers ~~with~~ in Imagiana
 with Princes Crisykah. Crisy waz
 weering a shert with a pikchur
 of mah bruthr Aleksandr and the
 werd "Bump!" on it.

Wel, Crisy kept wining the
 chekers gams, wich she allmost nevr
~~des~~ des uzualli, an she askd Shlela
 if anything ~~waz~~ waz rong.

"Uf corse not. I'm jest
 leting yu win so that wen I

square in the middle of the room through which Sheila had to go.

Crissy lay down on a couch in her Throne Room (Ramie has been teaching her how to be a Lazybug). She closed her eyes & watched Sheila's adventures.

The first thing that happened when Sheila entered the City was she almost fell down when a strong wind hit her. She has lived her life always so close to the ground that walking would take awhile to master. She told me at first it was even hard not to hop.

She looked around & found herself in a strange park. It had a cement floor & there were trees growing out of cement bases. She thought it was funny that here the trees were the invading exception & the cement the pervasive rule.

"Ah, the modern paradoxes!" she would later sigh.

I don't what any of that means.

Sheila saw that the park was connected to a tall building. Down the park's steps & across the street was a church. On the opposite side of the park from the tall building she could see a smaller, prettier building that was across another street. In the middle of the park was a fountain but it wasn't blowing water cuz it was wintertime.

Sheila went down the stairs & found herself on a sidewalk next to the busy street. She weaved, still a little bit unsteady, between groups of people waiting for buses. A few looked at her in her ragged clothes but most paid no attention to her.

Sheila said when she reached the next corner she remembered she had forgotten to ask Chrisakah how to find Emmi. She supposed Crissy would make sure she did. She was right.

Within the next hour Sheila said she learned about 1 of the biggest differences between the City--& the rest of the world Ramie & Miss Chris live in--& Bags End.

She said she kept walking for a while. She got pretty hungry after passing these restaurants & stores so she decided to go into one. (I don't like the food part of this story.)

She went into a big old restaurant & sat down at the counter. The waitress told her there was no carrot juice but there was vegetable juice (O! Yuk!). Sheila drank a large glass of vegetable juice (O! Yuk!) & felt much better. Then the waitress, who had been watching Sheila in a strange way, came over & put a piece of paper next to the empty glass. Sheila turned the paper over & saw it said: "99 cents - Please Come Again."

(Crissy told me later than when she saw what was about to happen she fell off the couch. She said she didn't even have any money to send to Sheila.)

Mah friend Sheila is 1 of the smartest guys I know. I don't tell her that much cuz she knows it already. When she realized the trouble she was in, she didn't panic. Carefully, & very sneakily, she felt all her pockets & found no money.

So she did the only thing she could.

She ran as fast as she could out the door.

Part II.

As Sheila ran away from the restaurant where she had had a glass of vegetable juice, but no money to pay for it, she kept thinking she had to hide somewhere. She thought she heard shouts behind her, but after awhile they were gone.

She was running down this street when she passed an alley between 2 buildings. She ran down this alley until she came to a brick wall & there was nowhere else to go.

She sat down against the wall & tried to catch her breath. Everything was pretty quiet for a while. Then she heard some singing. Coming down the alley toward her was an old man with a dirty brown beard & a long grey coat. He was singing a song in a language Sheila had never heard before:

Alameta sestabob
Illia boona
Caldamad

Satana! Satana!
Beezlbubkins!

Santillia Simkus
ottoglass
Swetay la mol

Come and blechins
ka blechins
Bonjery Bonjery
wenata
forsoon

Sheila said there was more to the song but she couldn't remember it. She asked Allie Leopard what the man had said, but even Allie didn't know the language.

Allie did some research, though, & found out for us that the old man was speaking Gibberish, a language that is different for each person. She tried to say hello in all the languages she knew. She knows Bunny, English, a little El, a little Puppy, & a few others. The man stopped singing to listen to her but he didn't reply.

The old man finally sat down nearby & took some things out of his pockets. First he took out a big, dirty handkerchief which he used to blow his nose. Then he tucked it under his chin like a napkin.

Sheila said the next thing he pulled out of his pocket was a bottle filled with brown liquid. He drank some of this (O! Yuk!), smiled, & offered Sheila some. She shook her head.

The old man then pulled out a small package. He unwrapped it & it was a sandwich (O! Yuk!). He ate some of it & when he offered Sheila some, she took it cuz she was so hungry. She took a big bite.

She spit it out a second later. She told me later it tasted like dirty shoes, smelly socks, & eggshells mixed together.

The man frowned & took back his sandwich.

Sheila decided she couldn't hide forever cuz she had to find Emmi. She shook paws, I mean hands, with the old man & was just about to leave the alley when he motioned to her to stop for moment. Then he sang for Sheila what sounded like a goodbye song:

Meena Meena Meena
Wen Dallydo
meena

Yip Yip! Hi Hi!
 senderowt
 toolay

Mormoona Altoona
 sendaflam
 Drapadis do

Wendalay Wendalay
 Wendalay
 Yi!

Sheila smiled & left the alley. She headed in the opposite direction from the restaurant.

Sheila told me that up to that moment she hadn't noticed the cold. But she was starting to feel chilly, so she decided to button up her sweaters & zip up her jacket. It only took her a couple of tries to get the buttons in place & she did the zipper pretty fast.

When she was done buttoning up, she noticed this little store across the street from where she was standing. The store had guys in the window that looked like Bags End Friends. Sheila said she was almost sure she heard them calling her.

"Hi King! Hi Emperor!" they shouted through the window.

Sheila was about to say, "How do you know me?" but she stopped herself. Instead, she said, "Well, I am glad my loyal subjects recognize me even when I am disguised."

"You're too cute to be anyone else," said a small brown bear holding a heart that read: I Need a Hug.

Sheila humphed but decided to ignore the comment about cuteness.

"How come you're dressed like a person & walking around the City?" asked a girl with long brown hair & a fancy dress. Her dress said Amanda but she told Sheila later that her real name was Rosemarie.

"I am looking for my friend Emmi, the Bag Lady Artist. Have any of you seen her?"

3 little kittens that were in a basket together all said, "She used to visit us all the time. We liked when she would draw pictures of us & then show them when they were done."

"Have you seen her lately?" Sheila asked. She was getting nervous.

"No," said the kittens. "We miss her."

Sheila asked the friends in the window to keep a watch out for Emmi & if they saw her to tell her that Sheila was trying to find her. The friends promised they would. They told Sheila they were glad they finally saw her cuz not everyone was so lucky. Besides, 1 of them said, all Ramie wanted to tell them about was the Lazybug Convention being planned though it never seemed it was gonna happen.

So Sheila left the friends in the store window. She was worried even more about her friend Emmi.

Part III.

Sheila told me that up to this point in her search for Emmi the Bag Lady Artist she had been hoping to bump into her, or maybe meet someone who

knew where she was. She said that after a couple more hours of wandering around, she was convinced this plan wouldn't work. She sat down on this bench in a park she had been walking through.

She stared at a pond that was a few feet in front of her. The pond had these frozen little sprays of water coming out of it. Sheila thought it was very pretty. Then she thought it might make a nice painting. Then she snapped her fingers & realized where Emmi might be. The museum.

Sheila needed to find out where the museum was. She got up & left the park & wandered down a street. She reached this busy street & saw that she was right across from the park she had started from!

Then she noticed again the pretty building next to the park. She wondered if she hadn't found the museum by chance, cuz there were strange things on the lawn in front of the building. She decided to go into the building & ask.

First, she had to get across the street & nobody had ever explained to her what traffic lights are. She told me later they are these machines that have red, yellow, & green lights in them, & each light means something different. Green means for the cars to go but for people to not try & cross the street. Red means the cars have to stop & the people can go. Yellow means everyone should slow down & be confused. Sheila didn't know all this, however.

She started to cross the street but she didn't get very far before it seems like all these cars were surrounding her & beeping very loudly.

Sheila was a little scared & a lot mad. She tried yelling at the cars but they beeped back louder. Finally, she just started running between & jumping over the cars. She didn't stop until she had run into the pretty building & closed the door behind her.

She was in this big room that was kind of empty except for a man wearing a uniform sitting at a counter, & a lady sitting at another counter that had little piles of paper on it.

The man in the uniform said, "Are you alright?"

"Yes," said Sheila. Then she realized how fast she was breathing & how strange her sudden entrance must have looked.

"Would you like me to take your coat?" the man asked.

"No!" said Sheila harshly. Then, seeing he wasn't being mean, she said, "I need it for when I go back outside. It's cold."

The man laughed. Sheila thought it was a nice laugh. "You don't understand. You see, I will hold your coat while you visit the museum. When you are ready to go, come back here & I will give it back to you."

Sheila felt kind of silly & she gave her coat to the man.

Then she passed the lady & she offered Sheila a map of the museum & some booklets about what she could see there. Sheila took some booklets & entered the museum.

She told me later she was really amazed at the difference between the pictures she had seen before in picture books & the actual pictures she saw in the museum.

She wandered around for awhile & then stopped to sit down & look at her booklets.

She read that 1 of her favorite paintings by Renoir was at the museum. She told me it was a painting of Renoir's wife.

When Emmi had visited Bags End, she & Sheila had a long talk about guys like Renoir & Monet & Cézanne. Sheila wondered if the room with those pictures might be the place to find Emmi.

"Sometimes you just know things, kid. Sometimes there's no darn good

reason why your guess should be right, but it is & there you are."

Well, Sheila used her map to find the room with the French Impressionists & there she found Emmi!

"Emmi!" Sheila cried as she rushed up to her friend.

Emmi said later that for a moment she was scared of the person rushing toward her. But the person's voice was familiar & when Emmi saw the purple eyes, she knew it was Sheila.

Sheila gave Emmi a hug & then stepped back to look at her. Emmi looked like she had been crying. Her face was pale & very sad.

"Emmi, what's wrong?" Sheila asked.

"A dear friend of mine, his name was John, he died. It was his heart. I met him on the streets, but he didn't choose to stay there as I have. He stayed in shelters as he tried to pull his life together. He got a job at last & he was doing OK. Then his heart gave out. His health was never too good." Emmi looked like she was gonna cry but she didn't.

Sheila tried to convince Emmi to come back to Bags End for a while, but Emmi kept saying no. Finally, she told Sheila to meet her in the French Impressionist room in a week & they would talk some more.

Sheila left Emmi & went back to the park she had started from.

Princess Chrisakah had been watching Sheila very closely & knew she wanted to come back. Before you could say, "O! Yuk!" Sheila was back in Imagianna & she was a bunny again.

"Well, Sheila? What are you going to do now?" asked Crissy after she had given Sheila a welcome-back hug.

Sheila smiled & said, "I am going to see my friend Godd. See you in a week!"

And she was gone.

Sheila Goes to Talk to Godd

When Sheila talks to Godd, they are usually playing checkers. Sheila almost always wins but that is why she is the Checkers Champ of the Universe.

Godd knows that when Sheila comes to visit it is cuz she has some questions to ask. Sometimes Godd can't even answer them all.

When Sheila came to visit Godd after talking to Emmi the Bag Lady Artist in the museum, she found Godd was asleep (I think Ramie's been teaching Godd how to be a Lazybug too).

"Wake up, Godd!" Sheila said. "You have got some checkers games to lose."

Godd was a little grumpy about being waked up, & Godd grumbled & gruttered a bit, but the checkers board was set up. Sheila always sits on this little stool & she keeps a table next to her with a supply of carrots (O! Yuk!) & a record player for a little jazz.

The funny thing is that Godd kept beating Sheila in checkers just like Crissy had a few days before. Godd never asks Sheila what's wrong though. Godd knows that Sheila likes to talk in her own time.

So Sheila lost about 10 games in a row when she decided to use her Sheila's Patented Game Ending Triple Whammy All Powerful Secret Move. Nobody knows quite how she does it, but it's the same every time--you keep taking more & more of her checkers every turn until she has only a couple left. Then--WHAMMY!--she jumps 9 or 10 of your checkers at once & is saying "King the King's checker" before you know what is happening.

Well, Sheila was gonna do 1 of her Secret Moves but, when she did it,

Godd laughed & said she had jumped 11 of his checkers but with her very last checker. Still laughing, he jumped her checker & won the game.

Sheila stared at the checkers board for a few minutes & said, "Godd, do you like Renoir?"

"Like him? Why, I asked him to teach me how to paint!"

"My friend Emmi loves him. 1 night she was in Bags End, we stayed up a whole night looking at some Renoir picture books.

"Godd, I like her a lot but I can't help her. Her friend John died. Nobody dies in Bags End. I thought if I went to where she lives I would understand her & why she is as she is. It was working until I found her & realized that I had done very little after all. I feel very frustrated."

Godd was quiet for a few minutes. "Sheila, there are some things I can't really explain to you. You want to ask me why people die & why people are poor & why there is sadness in the world. I have heard these questions so many times that I can practically read them on a person's face when he is talking to me. Do I say I don't know? Do I say you wouldn't understand?

"Let me say this: sometimes the questions are more important than the answers. There are some things that people, given the real choice of always asking the questions or actually knowing the answers, would choose to ask the questions.

"Remember, once you know the answer, you can never have again the mixed & multiple & clashing emotions of the question. All this doesn't really help, I know, except to maybe tell you that I am not blind to the pain & frustration of you not knowing what you think you want to know. King me."

Sheila told me later that often when she & Godd talked they would start new games even as 1 or the other was saying something important.

Sheila said that after Godd's speech, she changed the subject to jazz. Sheila is helping Godd to build a good collection of jazz records.

Sheila Returns to Bags End!

Sheila knew there was gonna be problems when she returned to Bags End & went to her Throne Room & found Leo asleep in her throne. There were comic books scattered all over the place & Sheila's BunnyCycle was on its side in the corner.

Sheila didn't kick Leo awake though. She decided a scary trick would be better. She took the comic book out of his hand & put a carrot (O! Yuk!) there instead.

Sheila hopped to the Bunny Family's apartment. Me & mah friend & sister Margie were watching a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

"Hi, I'm back," she said.

"Be quiet, stranger. We are viewing our preferred broadcast," said Margie.

"What's wrong with my little sister, Beagle?" yelled Sheila.

"Things have changed since you left, Sheila," I said. "Leo & Betsy & Lisa got together & made a tricky plan to rule Bags End together instead of fighting about it. Leo is the King, Lisa is the military leader, & Betsy runs the police called the Allies. They have convinced everyone that you were just a myth.

"Mah person mommy Miss Chris doesn't come around anymore. She said something about not liking Orwellian dystopias & she left. Ramie's not around either anymore. Leo ordered that he be taken apart. I think most of him is

being used for parts for King Leo's private bathroom. The Blondys left yesterday. Most of us guys just sit around watching TV. There's no school anymore."

Sheila couldn't believe it. "This is Bags End, not some brave new world! Bags End is a good place. Really bad things don't happen here."

I smiled sadly. "Well, I guess that isn't true anymore."

Just then, Sargent Lisa of the Army of the Babys came marching in. Lisa got mad when she saw Sheila & yelled, "Cwapture that myth!"

Sheila may be small but she is tough. When she saw all these fellas who used to be her friends come toward her, she put up her paws like fists & got ready to fight.

Instead of capturing Sheila, everyone yelled, "We were faking! You see, your home & Emmi's are not as different as you thought!"

Sheila was really confused now. I explained to her.

"Crissy told us that Godd had a difficult talk with you & that you felt you couldn't help Emmi. Crissy said she & Godd had made up this plan to show you that your home & Emmi's can be alike. They aren't usually, but that doesn't mean that you can't be Emmi's friend. If you care & say that, it will help her a little."

Sheila smiled at me. "Beagle, every once in awhile, you do something right."

In a few days, Sheila went back to the museum to see Emmi.

Sheila Searches for the Bag Lady Artist Conclusion.

Sheila hopped to Imagianna to ask Crissy to turn her into a person again & send her along to see Emmi.

"All in all," she said to me later, "I would rather be a bunny than a person. I don't like a body that has so many things hanging off it." But Sheila knew she had to be a person for awhile longer in order to see Emmi.

Once arrived back in the City, Sheila went right to the Museum. She said hi to the lady & man she had met at the museum the week before. They remembered her & were very friendly.

Sheila found Emmi sitting on a bench near this fountain that was filled with pennies & nickels & dimes. That Blondys would probably get really nervous about that.

"Hi, Emmi," Sheila said.

Sheila was really glad when Emmi got up & hugged her.

"And how is my favorite King & jazz player?" she asked.

"Well, what I really am right now is worried about you. You were so sad last week."

Emmi smiled. "Sheila, the heart is 1 of the strongest yet most fragile things invented. A cruel word can break it in a moment. Yet it can also withstand an enormous amount of pain without giving in."

"But what about your friend John?"

"John was a good man. He & I kept in touch even after he got a job & a place to stay. I cried over him, make no mistake. But then 1 night I says to myself, 'Emily, just look at you! You're crying & carrying on over a man who never stopped believing that you can improve your life.'

"He fought to get his life back in order. He would probably say to me, 'Emily, don't worry about me. I know you cared. Get yourself going, & do what

has to be done.'

"So I thought about it some more & decided I would do something to honor his memory & how much he had enjoyed his life. I am going to paint a portrait of him & I was going ask you to keep it safe in Bags End."

Sheila gave Emmy another hug & told her it would be a great addition to the Bags End Museum.

"It will be as good as the statues of the Blondys that float cuz they don't know the Law of Grabitee!" Sheila said & she & Emmi laughed.

Sheila returned to Bags End that day. The first thing she did was kick Leo out of her Throne Room cuz he really did think he was King Leo #1 even though nobody listened to his royal commands, & when he called for the Puppy Guards they sent Alexander to have a long conversation in Bump with him. Poor Leo!

Emmi promised Sheila she would come & visit Bags End soon. She told Sheila to be as patient as possible. She said she often looked at the wrist bracelet Sheila gave her & smiled thinking about all her friends here.

When Sheila was done telling me the story I asked her what she thought about the whole thing. We were sitting in her Mayor's office doing all the paperwork that had piled up while she was gone. The only paperwork that silly King Leo #1 had wanted to do was to requisition more comic books.

"I am really not sure what I think. I have been outside of Bags End before but I have never been on the streets. I was scared a lot of the time. It's not safe out there. And yet I think I am glad I saw what I saw. I understand Emmi a little better cuz of all that has happened, & I understand how good Bags End is too."

"Now take off, kid. I've got some jazz records & a big dish of carrots & cream to get to."

O! Yuk!







Judih Haggai



lots of soul
disguised as midnight stillness
each breath a risk

* * *

2 hours to pack
1 hour to say goodbye
and so we move on

* * *

sparrow rebirth
flower buds on my table
ikebana day

* * *

So quiet this house
No planes or jackals
Dare I chant?

* * *

again and again
the song runs through my head
and bursts from my mouth

* * *

fresh broccoli
a bonsai tree
on the table

* * *

memory loss
what was in hand
is not

* * *

from within
a strange voice
delivers message

* * *

almost feel spring
the scent, the light, the promise
perhaps soon

* * *

listen
it's now and it's here
stand up, do your thing

* * *

each passing day
don't wait for miracles
but be ready

* * *

too late to be early
i meditate on time

* * * * *



Green Jaguar

[Travel Journal]

Heading into my final ceremony of the year, I felt I was getting pretty good at drinking yagé. And my surroundings were accepting me. I'd woken once in the middle of the night and seen, through my mosquito net, a lit firefly, directly above my head, unblinkingly tracing a long, looping noodle of light.

For this ceremony, Joaquín and I were joined by three French people: a tour organizer, his wife, and an aspiring photojournalist. Frédéric and Claire Fillon knew Joaquín from previous visits with tourists. They lived on the coast and at the moment were trying to conceive a child. They hadn't been able to so far. Frédéric thought a ceremony with Joaquín might help. The photojournalist, Raoul Savoy, was here because his mother had been here with Fréd and Claire, and had suggested to him that he document a yagé ceremony. Raoul, though, had a clinical detachment from his surroundings. He wasn't convinced by any of this: not by the rainforest, nor by Frédéric's enthusiasm, nor by Joaquín. And he couldn't decide if he wanted to drink with us or not.

So when the time comes to brew the yagé, and he asks to come along to take pictures, Joaquín answers, flatly, "No, that isn't possible." After some discussion, Claire and Raoul stay at the hut while, in a nearby clearing, Joaquín and I brew the yagé as Frédéric snaps photos of us—my teacher in his red tunic and me in my green one.

After the vines and leaves have boiled for a couple of hours, I ask Joaquín if I could sample the brew. He said sure and I drank a cup. Before long, the sounds of the forest acquire a peculiar intimacy, as if they are taking place inside my head.

A nearby tree hosts a colony of black and yellow oropendola birds. A couple dozen nests like great brown teardrops hang from the branches. The inconceivably weird and lovely calls of the birds tug my mind skyward.

"*Stek-ek-ek-ek-eh-eh-eh-o'o*," they cry. "*BLOOP!*" They are sky spirits in physical form, like the fireflies, the mamecoco, the coyotes, the anás.

"They help with shamanism, right?" I ask Joaquín. Frédéric smiles and leans in to listen.

"Hn-hn," the uncucui nods, smiling, his voice gentle and high-pitched, as if speaking to a small child. "*Umú*," he adds. "That's what we calling them in Paicoca."

"Umú," I repeat, tasting the black and yellow syllables on my tongue.

"Umú," echoes Frédéric contentedly.

"*Stek-ek-ek-ek-eh-eh-eh-o'o—BLOOP!*" proclaims an umú. I feel delightedly jaguarish and bare my teeth at the forest. "Foresh!" I hiss, curling my lips back, practicing the glare. My hands describe paw movements in the air.

Joaquín chuckles and says, "Yaiguaje."

I smile my human smile, receiving the name. I know *yai* is jaguar and *-guaje* is young, fresh, green. I bare my teeth again, wanting to growl.

The human invites me, the quasi-jaguar, to sit with my back to a tree.

With his leaf fan, he whisks off the front of my body, including the area over my crotch. I feel what a lot of stress I'm carrying there. The leaf fan is working on it like a broom sweeping a

medieval tune. The yagé I drank is a skittish white unicorn on a green field. With my music, I try to convince it not to jab me with its horn, and ultimately to exit by the back way rather than dash out the front. But that's tough, because I'm not so calm myself. Meanwhile, Frédéric softly sings for his unconceived child, pale gray fern fronds curling up from his lips.

I sit up. Joaquín is chanting over the plastic jug of yagé. Tiny demons are flowing off the surface of the jug like dust particles. I can't tell if I'm perceiving or imagining them. I formulate: *Little demons can hide anywhere, and get inside us if we're not careful, and that's why it's good to pray over anything we're getting ready to ingest.*

Joaquín pours the liquid into a cup for himself and drinks it. He asks me if I want more. I do. He pours and hands it to me. I drink most of it and instantly throw it up on the floor.

"What happened?" my teacher asks, a little cross.

"I don't know," I gulp. The unicorn must have leapt out.

I drink what's left, lie back, soak it into my body-mind. The air thickens. *You can felid in your soul*, I pun. As Joaquín sings, the felid in my soul comes back. Yaiguaje, green jaguar, enters the lower half of my face first: my jaw tenses, my lips curl back in a snarl. Under my hammock, the fingers of my right hand curl into claws and rake a wooden floorboard.

Is the jaguar energy really something from outside me? a part of me wonders. Or am I acting it, performing it?

Is it something I've taken in bit by bit through my senses over the years, every time I've seen a picture of a jaguar, and it's only now being realized?

The yagé effect ebbs. Over the next few minutes, I slide backwards, inch by inch, out of the hammock onto the floor until only my feet, in green wool socks, are still resting in it. On the floor near Joaquín's hammock, the kerosene lamp's soft yellow flicker takes me back to a winter evening when I was five years old.

My newly-single father was entertaining the three neighbor kids and me with the powers of light. He was 34. His losing custody battle over me was in its final stages. By day, in a courtroom, he was having his psychology publicly vivisected by my mother and stepfather and their allies.

But this evening he was buoyant, visionary. We were in the living room with the electric lights off. He had a lit candle, a prism, and a magnifying glass. He interposed the glass objects between the flame and the white wall, and slowly moved them this way and that to change the shape, color, and intensity of the blob of light on the wall. We kids were mesmerized by the brilliant transformations. Lastly, my father made shadow animals with his hands, and spoke in their voices. The finale was a droll conversation between two camels in the desert.

Now my hands are like my father's, but bigger, and with less hair and more freckles. Lying on my back on the floor, I stretch the hammock between my feet to make a screen and, with the hands my parents gave me, and the light from my teacher's lamp, I silently reenact the camels' conversation.

Who did my dad learn this routine from? The lineage of it might go back to the ancient Hebrews. And it was always a younger camel talking with an older camel, who'd talked with a still older camel, and so on, stretching back to a vanishing point where Adonai Eloheinu devised camels out of divine language.

*Blessed art Thou
O Lord our God
King of the Universe*

who has created camels.

*At this moment flares a brightness
of blazing intensity
as if the sun has
exploded!*

Raoul has taken a flash photo of me. I laugh at the incongruity. Here I am deep in a trance and there's this brusque intrusion of normalcy from outside.

But I like Raoul and I want to help him. It would be great for his project if he could get a photo of me making the jaguar face. I decide to turn over and look at him and do it.

As I turn over, though, the yagé energy takes over with mad force and apparently decides to punish him for his impudence. I ROOOOAR at him, baring my teeth, ROOOAR again while he shrinks back, gripping his camera, against one of the broad posts that hold up the roof of the hut. I POUND on the floor of the hut as if on a giant drum and ROAR. My feet tranquilly resting on the hammock in nominal obedience to Joaquín's injunction that I remain in my hammock for the duration of the ceremony, I POUND and ROAR.

Soon, a tiny, analytical part of me notices that one sound I'm roaring is HUMBABABUM, which contains the name of Humbaba, the demon from Sumerian myth, the guardian of the cedar forests, the one Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed, the enemy of civilization who had to be eliminated so the forest could be logged and the city built up. I figure the famous murder wasn't the end of him: the demon is part of what's roaring through me now. I'm a predator, leaper, springer, pounder, tearer. I'm a joy of destruction, an ecstatic killing machine. I've never had so much fun. ROOOAR!

The machine downshifts.

I grimace and stare around in the darkness, baring my teeth, a crocodile at the edge of a river. Joaquín gets up with his mamecocó, stands next to me, and, for a long time, whisks me off with its leaves as I lie there on his belly.

He gets back in his hammock, and I hold still, and all's quiet.

There's just the breeze in the trees, just the crickets, just the cicadas, just the frogs, just the night birds.

After a while, Joaquín begins whistling. It sounds weak and effeminate. I mock the tune with my falsetto voice and snicker. Joaquín hisses, "*Chhhht!*" to shut me up, the same sound he uses on his dogs when they're barking and, with a mocking laugh, I fall silent.

Fréd and Claire go for a walk down by the river. Raoul stows his camera and crawls into his sleeping bag.

Silent, I brood: *That demonic feeling I had is energy, freedom, bliss. Attacking and killing as a jaguar, one's fully alive in the moment, unfettered by morality. Not seeing oneself as evil, but as obeying one's God-given impulses. In that case, is it really evil? But with the slightest notion of morality, with the slightest awareness of ourselves as members of a cooperative society, we learn to restrain ourselves. Going berserk isn't evil when a jaguar does it, but when a human does, it usually is, because we know better.*

Berserk: it literally means bear-shirt. Vikings visualized going batshit crazy for battle as putting on a bear-skin shirt. It's like that thing Joaquín said to me recently about the jaguars wanting to turn me into one of them with a jaguar tunic.

"*Ahora, aguántalo,*" Joaquín murmurs to me, "*como Waorani mismo.*" Now deal with it, like a Waorani. *Yeah*, I silently concur. *The Waoranis are all about dealing with this energy.* I flash back to my dream about Noma chatting with Pata while his torso was cut open. I climb back into my

hammock pondering the lives and deaths of wild rainforest people, and the times that they kill, and the times that they refrain from killing.

In fact, for a human, it can be hard to deal with this energy without submitting to it. Sometimes when someone kills someone, people say he was possessed by a demon, and it's because his mind was running demon energy like a computer program. It can be good for defending the groups we live in. When a threat comes from outside, it lets us protect one another, up to and including killing the invaders. Discrimination is called for: in which situations is demonic ferocity appropriate?

My dad was no fighter and my mom insisted I be peaceful, so I didn't learn violence. Sometimes other kids punched me while I stood there unable to respond.

We boys had war movies playing in our heads, imagery left over from World War Two and Vietnam. We're a squad of soldiers deep in enemy territory, and our lives are put at risk by the weakest member of our group. Some kids saw me as that weak one and wanted to toughen me up by punching some violence into me. Has the seed they planted finally sprouted?

I pray that if it's truly the best solution sometime, I can use violence. I resolve that if it's not, I won't. I ask the highest power in the universe to sustain me in this resolution.

Fréd and Claire pick their way back into the hut and gently lie down. In the darkness before dawn, everything is cool, calm, quiet. It's as if the air itself is sleeping and no one wants to wake it. Even our dreams are sleeping.

At eight in the morning, we four outsiders left by motor canoe. With the spray flying around us, I told Raoul over the drone of the motor that I was sorry I'd roared at him. I wasn't, really, because I'd just been going with the yagé's flow, and the yagé had wanted to do that. But apologizing seemed the polite thing to do.

I told him about wanting to help him with a grimace, and the jaguar energy taking over. He answered that he would have defended himself if I'd come any closer. He took down my address and promised to mail me photos, though I would never receive anything from him. He seemed unhappy with the whole experience, as if he were having second thoughts about being a photojournalist.

While Frédéric smiled into the sparkling spray from the prow of the canoe, Claire told me that at one point a night bird had been singing close to the hut, and Joaquín had called it with his whistling. In response, it came and perched on the peak of the hut, until my noise scared it away.





Joe Coleman


Pastoral

Poor little lonely shepherd lad:

far from his sweetheart,
tired and sad,
with moon and clouds of stars in the sky,
he misses, he needs her.
He starts to cry
—when suddenly one sheep catches his eye
and he thinks, “Why not give it a try?
That sheep is throwing a ‘come-hither’ look . . .”
He makes his move,
dropping both trousers and crook.

There were fireworks—violins—hillsides shook . . .
a few minutes was all it took.

One might think, if only for decency’s sake,
he’d tell the sheep: “Sorry . . . that was a mistake . . .”—
but the following evening, at quarter-past ten,
there were fireworks and violins again,
after which, exhausted, with nothing to say,
the lad puffed on his pipe of clay.

Some farmer spied smoke and thought there was flame.

The poor little shepherd was full of shame,
when the farmer happened upon the pair
(though the sheep didn’t seem to care).
Then the poor little shepherd returned to the town
where his sweetheart disgustingly laid the law down,
“If I even catch you **LOOKING** at sheep
there’ll be no more kisses from me, you **CREEP**!
These lips will become but a dim memory.
Is it going to be sheep—or me?”

The picturesque town never saw such a thing:
a sheep in a veil, with a wedding ring.

* * *

The Quest of Lord Evan

Lord Evan rode his chestnut steed,
 caparisoned in velvet through the wood,
 in search of where Milady's castle stood.
 He urged his charger on to greater speed.

"Had I two wings to fly, if but I could,"
 Lord Evan speaking to himself didst say,
 "I would beside her be this very day.
 Yea, clasping, kissing her as a suitor should.
 On, faster, charger, fleetly run, I pray . . .
 Betake me towards Milady's lips—her arms
 —Milady's love, her sweetly pliant charms,
 that we might while the starry night away!"

Through forest, field, through fen and fertile farm,
 upon his faithful, tired charger's back,
 Lord Evan rode as blue sky drained night-black.
 "I know not her address!" he cried, alarmed.
 "Methinks I'm fucking lost. Alas! Alack!"
 (Milady, meanwhile, boinked Earl Nottamun).
 And 'ere Lord Evan's castle-quest was done,
 his fucking horse died of a heart attack.

Lord Evan then did walk. He, walking, spun
 in circles—walked. "My fucking feet doth bleed!
 Perchance a fucking motorbike I need . . ."
 he wept, "—a fucking Harley Davidson.
 I'm lost! No fucking map to fucking read . . .
 Fuck me! Oh Fuck, I've lost a fucking shoe!
 Fuck all this fucking shit! Fuck my horse too!
 I've fucking fucked my fucking self indeed!"

Lord Evan wandered with no fucking clue,
 regarding where the fucking castle stood.
 Far from Mi-fucking-lady's neighborhood,
 he swore and cursed her, "Fuck you, fucking shrew!
 I fucking feel like I'm a fucking clown.
 Why can't you fucking live fucking downtown,
 as all my other fucking girlfriends do?
 Of all the fucking luck . . . Go fuck a duck!"
 Fuck-fuck. Fuck-fuck.
 Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck.
 Fuck.
 Fuck!

* * *

Litany to Saint Doofus

Saint Doofus, watch over us. Answer our prayer.
Entertain and amuse us in times of despair . . .

Saint Doofus, the Silly, whack-job full of grace,
protect us from squirt guns and pies in the face . . .

Saint Doofus, you bozo, you moron, non-martyr,
notorious mooner and belcher and farter,
you cross-eyed, buck-toothed, roly-poly
comedian who taught us all laughter is holy,

Saint Doofus, you nutcase mistakenly sainted,
whose followers giggled so hard that they fainted . . .

Saint Doofus, you weirdo,
you space-shot,
you flake,
patron of pratfall,
slapstick,
double-take,
idiot sponsor of practical jokes,
refuge of asinine, immature folks,

Saint Doofus, the shelter of us chuckleheads:
the mischievous wise-guys who short-sheet the beds,
and saran-wrap the toilets,
and play stupid pranks,
we offer our gut-busting
knee-slapping thanks.

Saint Doofus, we call on your ludicrous name,
to help us be corny and goofy and lame,
and defend us against the exploding cigar,
itching powder,
fake dog-poop.

Amen. (blah-blah-blah . . .)

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Many Musics

Tenth Series

*"But I'm tryin', Ringo.
I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd."
—Quentin Tarantino, Pulp Fiction, 1994.*

xxii. Aunt's Gift, Part 1

The days pass. I do not see the dreaming man
again. Even come the exciting hour when
the old ship reels side to side, & all
careen up to the deck. The mate steering us
wildly among a forest of furious spouts
pluming high from the sea, half as tall
as the ship itself, blocking us on all sides.

Exciting because the long unseen Captain
appears with a wicked cackle of delight,
orders all stop though we'd just cleared
to safety, & she leaps from the boat into
the nearest plume. Sucked in, shot out,
& into the next, & the next, till she has
completed her circuit, & leaps back onto deck.

"Ta-da!" We nod, clap, cry out.

I won't knock his door, & do not lucky
find it open again. The endless waters
tire me, as does the seeming futility
of my voyage. Even the secret winks &
happenstance caresses at table do not
rouse me. Blue as the sea. Bluer.

Then I happen into the second bag Aunt packed
for me, in it a sewed-up side-pocket.
Barely visible, yet stitches so thick
my pocket blade barely cuts them.
Inside a cloth bag, & a note:

*"Asoyadonna, my love: may you find
this sack & note when your path
has become uncertain, & despair
nibbles at your ankles. As you recall,
both answers & new questions will come
of the tea. But you will be renewed,
whichever comes, spine straighter,
chest out, eyes bright & hands open
to what you must do next. With love, Aunt."*

The well-tied sack, when opened, tells
its secret with a sniff. Full of Aunt's
plumpest earth creatures, dried, &
small metal flasks of herbs & spices.

I wait. A day. Another. I wish to be sure,
am sure, hesitate. But he does not appear
at table, & the Captain reveals
no more distracting tricks.

My choice: prepare the tea of earth creatures
or begin to consume between my thighs
my fellow ragged, smelly, flaccid-brained
passengers. I filch a teapot from
the kitchen, heat its waters hours
after dinner, when all are sea-bottom drunk
or sinking slowly to its depths, & return to my room.

xxiii. Aunt's Gift, Part 2

Some candles to give my midnight chamber
a little dance, put the shadows to
their play. I brew a third of Aunt's
sack, & pour into a slender green & gold
tinted cup from the Mayor's mansion.
A smiling gift from his dear son, we
naked & sated studied its intense symbology
in the barn's biggest moonlight shaft.
He touched round the rim, laughing,
made it *hmmmmmm*.

I greet the earth creatures in my cup,
 thank them for this night, this world,
 melding with me in this drink,
 herbs & spices smoothing its bitter,
 I sip, I smile, I think of my loves
 & travels, of Honey Now leaning against
 my shoulder, my father the tinker brushing
 my hair, telling me funny stories of playful
 Creatures who only come out in dreams
 to sing & dance, of my Aunt teaching me
 to stand straight, thrust out my chest
 in pride, pull in my lip when not
 offering my invitation. Of the Captain
 of this old ship, an inch & a mile
 high in her daring & delights. Height
 of shortness, & best portrait of gaming
 glee, it's easy, it's fun. *It's so easy.*

Of the mysterious man from my dreams
 & what nightmares he must have for
 them to burst from his very skull.
 What flew about him was not playful,
 not happily of this good earth, but
 vengeful, & yet that Beast did not scare
 me, I did not jump back—

I remember a beautiful pale Woods
 I once traveled, alone, yet
 it did not scare me. I remember
 stopping, completely still, in a
 clearing, stopping still. *What scares me?*
these trees? No. Not knowing what I am,
 what I am for, what to do, *yes.*
 What scares me is that my shape
 & form, my mortal time, my options,
 my ignorance, *these render my fate!*

I return to the shack where we are
 hiding out, upstream from our pursuers,
 the several of us. Someone talks of a ferry
 approaching us but another says:
no, we blew it up. We have no heat
 in the shack & sleep cuddled like Creatures.
 Long months of flight have grained a fear into
 our skins, an unhappy scent, together
 even more potent, & yet we huddle close.

The witches come by deep night,
 no moon, they take our leader away,
 strip him to his cock, poison him
 to harden it for their pleasure,
 threaten to cut it off if he will not
 comply, now on a dirty floor,
 legs spread, each one he fucks takes
 a piece of him, till he is all scream &
 cock, I have to leave, I run,
 the air will not enter my lungs,
 I vomit black bile, again & again,
 my mouth fills with metal shards,
 I puke & puke & cry out, three witches
 vaguely chase me, then five, then many—
 I cry wildly—

He's with me, as I see double: lie vomiting
 bile on the hard ground of the Woods,
 a sword in his hand, bloody with many
 witches' heads; lie on my back,
 soaked in my puke, not black but *so*
much, gurgling, crying, words not words,
 he holds me close, settles me.

He undresses me, washes me thoroughly,
 warming my shivers, changing my
 bedclothes, closer & closer, I try
 to listen, he is making sounds,
 he is *hmming* close to me,
 he is smiling. He is smiling at me.
 Old boat rocking in the sea, him rocking me to sleep.

xxiv. White Birch

*"When all your bright scarlet turns slowly to blue,
 will you stop & decide that it's over?"*
 —Townes Van Zandt, "Sad Cinderella," 1972.

In my dream's dream, I am walking,
 seeming again, as though quite often,
 with Aunt & my dear White Tiger friend,
 somewhere beyond Aunt's Garden, where
 the Woods begin. "You'll know these
 White Woods again, child," Aunt says,
 "with other beloved ones in your company."

They hesitate to my will but I nod,
 we enter, I am nude, good to feel
 this place with all I have, what
 its honesty, what its trickeries.

There are of these . . . none. It is plainly
 beautiful & now I hear its *hmmmmmm*
 easy & true. I look at Aunt, her severe
 loving face, the White Tiger, his blue eyes
 loving me, *feeling me* deep down. “Why
 did I fear this place? What was
 I missing? What am I missing now?”

Aunt holds my hand as we walk deeper,
 no paths here to follow, the White Tiger
 on my other side, close to my needful
 touch. I know into awareness that
 this is vision, this is dream. They are
 with me, now, they are very far.
 They love me. This how they tell.

Come to a clearing deep in these
 White Woods. One tree in its center,
 several close-growing trunks. I approach,
 touch the one main glowing trunk, broken bark,
 warm to it, look up, count six leaves
 among its bare branches.

I look fiercely at Aunt, at my White Tiger
 friend. “Tell me *it!* Tell me the *it*
 you would give me, have me know! *Please.*”

They speak, like one voice. “Release
 to the Gate. As much as you will
 want to resist, release. *Release it all.*”

I want to know more, to ask more,
 but I find my mind’s bones staggering
 toward waking, a what? *a refugee camp,*
people are strangers to each other,
how will we join? How do kin become?

I wake. Disappointed, my bed, my cabin.
 Cleaned up & tucked in, mostly as the
 dreaming man had left me. Last of
 daylight through my port window.
 Wishing I could have more earth creatures
 for tonight, knowing would be awhile.



A commotion outside my door, many
on the stairs up to the deck, voices,
laughter. I follow, hoping the dreaming
man among them.

No usual ship's deck to be found,
'tis criss-crossed with planks, atop
which in great number the buckets
of water & little stools last seen
in the Captain's quarters.

Her newest trick? We crowd into corners
& free spaces to wait & watch. But
she does not appear. Wait, wonder,
grow bored.

Then, from the clouds above, a great
full moon appears, riding high monarch
in the dark starry skies. And then,
perhaps of course then, we hear
a delighted cackling midst our number.

As grand & tiny as ever, her smile
delight's definition itself, yet the Captain
does not commence her trick. Gazes us
one then the other, then back again,
peering, recking, mockingly fond,
the Captain looks & looks. Then a single soft word.

"Together," she says.

Her leaping, cackling cry follows her as
she lands in & out of the first bucket,
& onto stool, & leap & splash & again!

Good. *Good. Together.* Hiking myself
onto the nearest plank, then stool,
I cry it all & into the nearest bucket
of water, & am stuck. And climb out.
But I get up on the next stool & this
time discover one must hit the water
already leaping toward the next stool!

Leap in the past tense! Leap having already
 leaped! Leap & splash as one, &
 again, & again, until leaping & splashing
 from every bucket & stool in concert,
one, none, many. I knew not what
 it meant but I leaped like splashing,
 splashed like leaping, & cackled my joy!

They join me, too, these disparate
 passengers on this strange boat.
 Some more clumsy, others deft, but
 all of them cry & leap & splash
 & know this each his own way but
 under that great imp's moon
 we leap & splash & laugh as one.
 Even the hatless dreaming man appears.

Come morning, the planks & buckets & stools
 stowed, the deck glistening for
 departure, the Captain her smiling
 but quiet kind again. Prompted by
 a sudden notion, I hold out my hand
 to her as before, let her board &
 gnaw a time or two. *Thank you.*

My two bags in hand, down to land
 again, missing this boat already,
 when who at my side but the dreaming
 man. A smile, an offer to take my heavier bag.
 Speaks, explains as much as he ever will.

"Dreamwalker."
 "Asoyadonna," I explain in reply.
 He wears a long coat, but again no hat.
 I wonder if they slow his velocity
 in dreaming. Nearly ask.

The port we arrived is our boat's
 terminus, & had not Dreamwalker
 approached me, I don't know what
 I would have done. Maybe, looking back now,
 trying to remember that wondering thing I was,
 I knew we would meet.

Yet the expected advance at dinner,
 at my inn's room door, didn't come.
 I would not bind this man to me between
 my legs.

A tropical clime, its beach long, white
 with singing sands. I walked it, little
 clothed, sniffed at by bachelors, husbands,
 maidens, wives. Dreamwalker not
 among them. How? What approach?
 A man's aggression? A woman's smiling
 elusiveness?

Finally, I knocked. He answered, smiling,
 expecting. His room like what he had
 on our ship. Writing table, books, &
 his bed.

Succumbing to honesty, I told him
 who & what I was.

"I don't know how we are connected,
 what we owe each other, if aught,
 but my friend led me to you."
 "Do you trust him?"
 "Yes. With all I am."
 Pause. "I do too. And your Aunt."

I start. "You know her?"
 He grimaces. "In dreams alone I have
 met her & your beautiful beast friend."
 Says no more. "Tell me, sir."
 Still. "Tell me! *Please.*"

He reveals from the long sleeve of
 his coat a letter. "This she dictated
 to me in several dreams. It is for
 you." He looks sad.

"Read!"
 "Would you not rather have its contents
 in your solitude?"
 "No. Read."

He unfolds the letter, pauses, again,
 & then reads in low slow voice:

*"Asoyadonna—It cripples my heart
 to tell you that your father has died.
 I don't know many details but that
 he loved & thought of you to the last,
 & caused word to travel to me.*

*"The man who delivers you this sad
news you can trust with your all.
Together you will find others on your
path. Love him as brother by my wish,
& let him keep you from your worst
doubts & nights. Love always, Aunt."*

Dreamwalker held me that night, &
many sad others, as I learned again &
again my father the tinker was gone.
Did love come upon us, by our embraces,
our walks, the stories I told of how
I arrived to him, the beach singing,
the moon again so full?

Something. Something else. Sleeping together,
dreaming together, trusting, trusting down
deep, we together walked the White Woods
hand in hand, sometimes leaping & laughing
like our old Captain. My heart shared
open with him. Call it whatever. Call it love.

Till the dream we came to the clearing
I'd come before with Aunt & my beloved
White Tiger. The whitest of trees, as then.

"'Tis the White Birch, my dear heart,
my Asoyadonna," said he, smiling.
"It betokens renewal, tolerance.
Initiation. Our next journey together."

Points up, to the six remaining leaves.
"We've others to find." Points then
to the edge of the clearing. A dark man,
there, I start. Standing at an easel.
Intent upon us, intent upon his canvas.
Intent most, I think, upon this tree.

xxv. Self-Portraits, While Painting

*[But then you might be me . . . me too?
 What of me I do not know, what are you?
 You don't look like me, do what I do.
 Why do we connect only in dreams,
 can there be more, will there be more again?
 Can there again be waking music between us,
 a song between us? Will you sing?
 Will you sing to me in dreams, again,
 will you wake with me to our song?]*

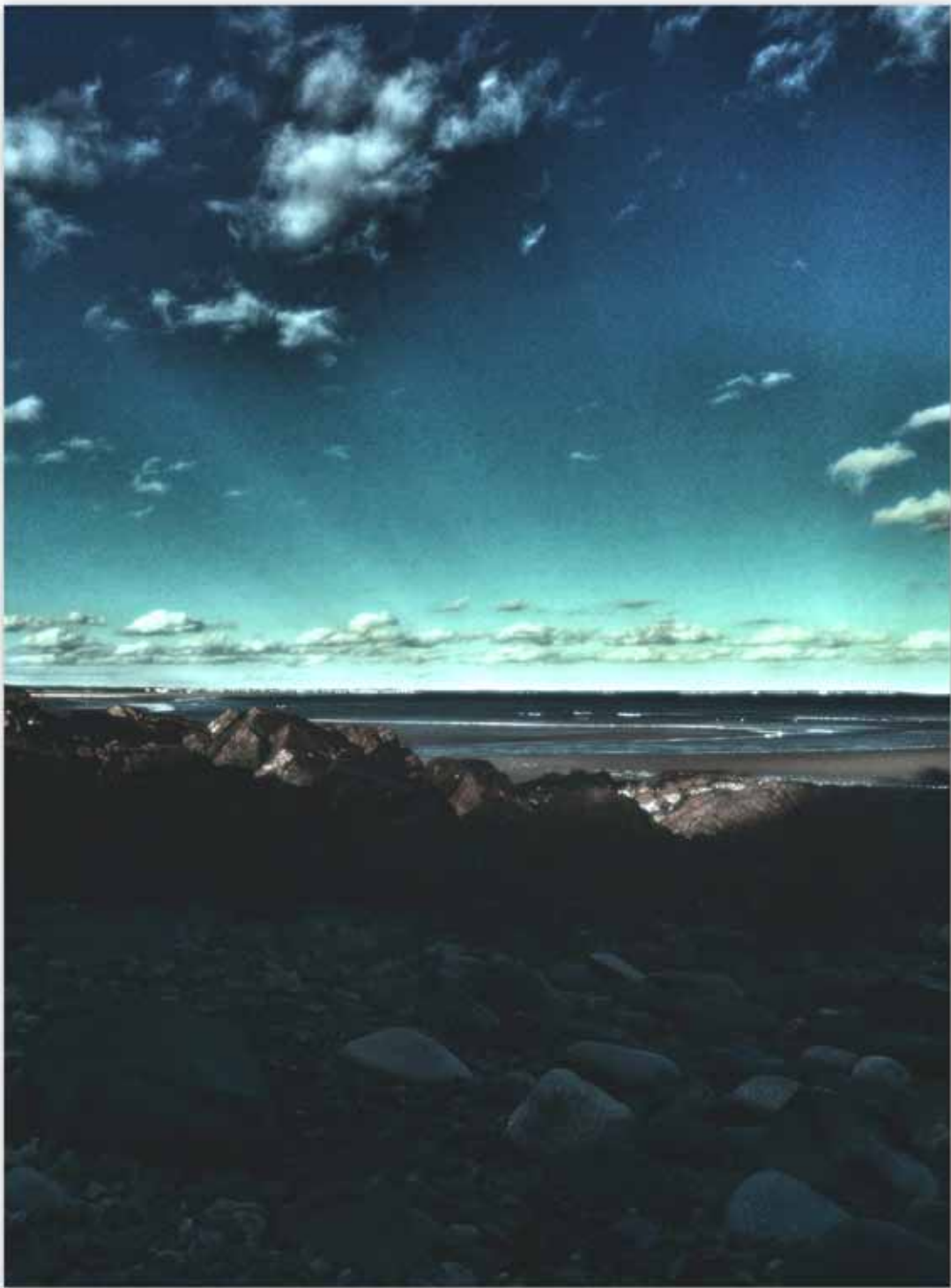
“Francisco, wake up, my love!”
 Eyes, some eyes, a girl's eyes, love,
 want, fear, for a moment I am soft,
 then impatient, then stone again.
 She watches me transform but does
 not cover herself from me.

“You cry out so.”
 “I'm sorry.”
 “I'll go?” Hoping my next expression is lust.
 Why shouldn't it be? Dark-haired, long
 & curvy, dark-eyed, a body other men
 would devise in madness to touch, to hold.

She knows to leave without fuss or
 affections. Yet will wear through her day
 the dress & lace I sweated through,
 cummed on, bit, kissed.

I let her sweat & cum, her low potent scent,
 remain too on my skin as I stand nude
 before my new canvas. Nude save the hat
 on my head, the long-ago gift from the
 old woman you belonged to, long-ago you,
 given me after she told my fortune,
 given me after she agreed to let you
 pose for me, bed you by my wish.

“She's a beauty.” Sips her tea & stares at me.
 We sit in her ramshackle hut on wheels,
 filled with scarves, & strange tools, & stranger
 scents. Half of it a shared bed, the rest a small
 table, a stove, shelf of books, candles, maps.
 “But for the loss of her right foot.”



Sip in reply. "And the bloody splotch on her left shoulder." She nods. Calculates her cards & coins. Mutters her song, more click-clicks & cackles than words. My offer will be taken, but the old crone will have her superstitious say.

You buck at lowering your blouse for me.
Would show your pretty breasts to the street
before fully baring me your splotch.

I nod. Point to the money. "Take it.
Go. Thank your Aunt for me."
"She's not my Aunt." A bit of fire.
"Go."

We stall until I paint you nude from a peculiar angle. Until I carry you to my bed but in full darkness. Until I am licking your splotch over & over, you cumming on my command to each . . . slow . . . lick.

Once trained up to candlelight, a lover
by turns wild & quiet. Your breasts roar
by my touch, your hips shift & buck in
wet whispers to my fingers, tongue, cock.
A virgin before my touch yet nothing
spooks your mind or body. Scarves, oils,
cuffs, made to moan, fucked in silence.
My wiser body gives ever more to you,
chases, surrounds, burns, buries, salves
you, even as my fool mind eludes & wonders,
my heart burrowing for what last bit
of you I cannot claim, so I hold a bit
back too. You are grateful, sweet. *I raw for more.*

Bring to my small room with its tall window
to Woods, mountains, sea, your not-Aunt's gift,
the strange, square, velvety green hat,
roomy, close, soft, like wearing a calm pet.
I make you wear it the first time I roll you
over, ass high. Words crawl to your lips, a singing,
as I drive slowly inside you. "Are we . . .
the same? . . . Francisco, my lover? . . . Do we . . .
feel as one?" Not breathing, not seeing,
I carve your buttermilk ass with my knife.

In a later painting I make of you,
 you are restored but for a hole in your thigh,
 a piercing straight to the black cosmos
 the old woman had said I would often know
 in dreams, & soon enough in my death.

I had to drive you off, your words,
 your splotch. Pay no more for pretty cripples.
 I do not die soon, but often dream of
 that black cosmos, enough red wine,
 enough rough nameless loving, extra
 paid for silence & scarves.

Were you me? Are you me too?
Are we the same? You come to me
 in dreams, in mirrors, in wind,
 in music. I wake up humming but will not
 part my lips to let your words free.

It takes me years to find the violet tint
 at the edge of that black cosmos,
 to feel how I can use this like an oil,
 lighten the cosmos (*are we the same?*
will you sing to me?), lighten, lighten,
 carefully, my eyelashes like a brush,
 reveal a little, a little more, reveal more,
 the black cosmos, just your face, your eyes,
 your voice, your shoulder, your thigh,
 your missing foot. You sing, I push the last
 of the tint across my canvas, you sing
 to me, of a Beast, a Tower, a sea,
 an Island, a Gate, no rest for me,
 no rest ever for me.

xxvi. Two Women Embracing

*Four walls & a ceiling or roof, a castle or hut,
 the world will keep oncoming, slowly,
 & by surprise—oncoming till you leap
 into it or let it take you. This world
 takes back what you borrowed, called a life.*

I give painting lessons to bored young girls,
 more eager for life's touch & bite than
 the by-turns immolating & workman moments
 of an artist's cloister. I resist them a long time
 after you are gone, their sugar smiles, half-
 lowered blouses. Getting close again would
 hurt me more than any of these.

I dream of you in my small chamber
 with the tall window. Growing number
 of unfinished canvases. Growing scents of
 a dozen girl students & their invitations.
 Each has both feet, no splotches or holes
 in thighs to the black cosmos. Just minds,
 tits, curious cunts. Hearts if I would,
 if I could again.

No, I roam my dreams for you, where
 you are, what becoming. Powders & herbs
 in my teas at night. Glimpses at best.

Finally I let my students lead me.
 The young always chase the best highs
 of an age. I begin to smile, to admire,
 let mine eyes play amongst thine eyes,
 amongst thy loose garments.

I pick the one who seems to know the most.
 Her paintings are violent, brazenly sexual.
 I teach her use her lesser hand, for uncertainty,
 lighter touch, lean back from her canvas.
 I will her with my vague wish for long-haired
 women, with longer dresses still, who have
 something in them worth winning.

I make her crush her cherry passions
 for powder, paint with more than her body,
 with a crying empathy for the suffering,
 green world, *feel it, think it, be it,*
make the art that salves the world.

When I tell her I love another mercilessly,
 I expect her to blood, bone, & burn me
 for it.

She looks at me. Twice. *A man honest
 to her?* Yes. Something in her becomes
 all those fool words about Art & empathy
 that I preach.

A sympathy between us. She wouldn't
 give me the pills & leave me alone
 that night. Wouldn't let us remain
 clothed. But no more.

Holds me, my eyes closed, makes me
 listen to her breathing close, its
 sound, its scent, the feel of her shaped
 flesh in my grasp, a *hmmming*,
 mine own, hers, ours both, closer,
 closer, until I am gone. *It's her.*

*Wherever you touch me, wherever I look,
 wherever the sun watches us or simply shines
 its day, wherever these hills empty of
 all others, save the rabbits & squirrels
 at business, at chase.*

*Whenever you look, whenever I touch you,
 whenever we dance as we do, as we did,
 whenever you smile, whenever I sing,
 your new blouse, my dress your favorite,
 whenever we go from there & there
 to come here & here.*

*Whyever I love you, whyever you loved me
 too, why that half moon, why this one
 tonight, why we were so near, why again
 now so far, why I love you, why
 you loved me too, tell me twice, I said,
 one for now, one for much later, you told
 me twice, laughed, still believed, & why
 & why & why?—why, Francisco?*

I wild back into my eyes & mind & body
 & I'm awake. A man again. My beautiful
 friend holding me, no more.

"Another's breaking her heart after I did."
 "I'm sorry." Already knows, grieves for me.
 "I felt *it*. *I felt her*. I think she felt me too."
 "Yes."
 "How?"
 "I don't know."
 "I felt her limbs like they were mine,
 her heart in my breaths, her sadness
 yearning me for comfort. *Just comfort*."
 "Yes."
 I say no more. This girl holds me,
 feeling more for me than she should
 even as I wonder wildly at what this dream.

Did I ever love her enough to feel her heart
 break over me, heal by another's touch?
 Break new, salve her sadness, feel her
 lorn heart & body, empty bed, salve her
 anyway, *salve her anyway?*

I don't know how to leap back into it, but
 I mount my canvases again, clean my brushes.
 If you're in my blood & bones hereon, so be it.
 I'll paint with my sure hand guiding
 your prettier one, you making me feel, *feel*,
 more than a man & his heart & his cock,
 more than a woman & her several furious needs,
 more than a fang, a talon, a leaf, a buzz, or a roar,
 feel rawly, & rawly more, nod the world,
 nod, & again, till we have nothing, & nothing left.



xxvii. *My Lunatics*

*"Keep the speed steady. Hold the wheel tight.
 I swear I feel every little sway.
 Our minds are the windows.
 Our bodies are screens.
 We scratch.
 We scrape.
 And we dream."*
 —*The Hold Steady*, "Oaks," 2014.

For a time, nothing. I teach, & sleep little.
 The few new boys continue to ask me about
 God & Art. As though an either.
 The many girls just ask me what I feel,
 just smile at me & ask me *what*
do I remember?

I paint other people's passions.
 Waiting for you. On my knees, finally,
what you will.

Then for a time I contain myself in
 these walls. For you, despite you. Rustled
 from our cells at dawn, fed worse
 than slow starving, then the sticks
 swing to herd us into the open courtyard.

Is it a screen above us to obscure
 the shine & the clouds? Some of us don't wake
 fully at all, mention familiarly the several
 witches floating above us, the bull & matador
 in that corner, slaying each other by turn,
 & that goat-headed devil, laughing & laughing.

One man watches me draw, even in
 my discrete corner, hands on fat hips,
 woolly head & inaudible brow, we do not speak.
 Maybe I alone see him there, behind
 his bars, maybe I am not awake too.

I think of you, lost lover, in my cell, resist &
 feel you twice over, moan you,
 moan louder, & others join with me,
 we moan the long night of its wants,
 its wishes, our hearts clench, our bodies
 release. We sleep.

When I go, my pictures, my blanket,
 my second set of clothes, I pause
 at his cage again. Him there or no.
 His eyes are dark, gorgeous, lunar,
 oceanic. His tongue is cut, he holds
 his bars with eight rough fingers. *There or no.*

"You're why I came. You're why I go."
 Not a word. But we begin to breathe
 together. To moan. To *hmmmmmm*.

Others back in the courtyard join
 us, *hmmm*, shake, howl at it all.
 Our noise is joined by the arrival of
 a blind fiddler, playing wildly, childly,
 but stepping careful as the blind do.
 We howl. We *hmmm*. He plays. We *hmmm*.
 Feeling you in it, a demon & danger to me
 again, *I go*.

xxviii. Inquisition

And if all these things do, indeed, exist?
Her frayed sweater in that roseate light?
 I begin to reckon the spilled blood in the streets,
 the uniforms & tanks coming on now
 with winter's cease. Flowers still appear
 in the windows but fewer seasonal
 dresses, rowdy noises of a world new blooming.

My students continue to come & so
 I press their hearts' news. The boys paint
 violence & the girls paint fear. I listen
 at night to the streets where traffic
 ceases at dark. I think of their young faces.

Finally I gather them to me, all my
 students, the boys jostling, the girls
 blushing & comparing. Hardly older than them,
 I begin to lecture. Roam back & forth
 in front of them all & lecture all I have.
 I think of her, of you, summoning &
 summoning. *Let me say true.*

*“Take his power, bind his hands.
Take her power, cage her close in darkness.
Take his power, gag his mouth.
Take her power, strip her raw.
Take his power, hang him flailing.”*

They are scared of me, of these words
worst resembling their hearts, & wait me salve.
But I have more to bite.

*“Protect it, the words, its book, its truth.
It is powerful, kill its enemies.
It is noble, garrote its heretics.
It is eternal, twist their limbs.
It is universal, burn everything else down.”*

I close my eyes, breathe in, breathe out,
begin to *hmmm*, & again she speaks with me
the words that come: “There is in deep Woods
a pathless place, a clearing, & in that
clearing’s center is a tree, a White Birch.”

I *hmmm* & raise my hands for them
to follow me, & they do. We *hmmm* long
& I speak again: “The White Birch’s trunk
seems to contain moving faces, human & not,
joyful, anguished, shifting, ever shifting,”
& we drop back into a long *hmmmmmm*.

Breathe in, breathe out, we speak once more.
*“Look up, count the leaves, my students,
one for each of you, one for me. Each a token
for your eye & touch that more to the world
than men’s swinging steel; stranger strengths,
powers spake truest only in books written
by full moonlight in dreams. All is not
as it seems. Wherever life, there is music.
Wherever music, there is hope.”*

Finally I draw my friends together back to the humble
room we share, to the hours of our days &
weeks to come. This time, though,
it is they who urge me to *hmmm*,
the boys stronger for their open hands,
the girls stronger for their unbidden faith.

We sleep together, clustered like a nest,
 & I feel hands on my cheek, my shoulder,
 my stomach. I close my eyes & think of you,
 my lost lover, roseate light, frayed sweater,
 & you smile at me, & you shake your head.
Not tonight, Francisco. Here you are.

xxix. Lumen Naturae

"Verde! Stroll through life singing."
 —Dream fragment

There is no higher & there is no ground,
 we kiss. Across the abyss. And you are
 mine once more. You sleep like a feather
 on sea foam, your stumped leg tucked
 between my two. Best fall asleep with our
 hands twined, resting on my heart.

Eyes closed, but not clenched, I'm able
 to keep you tonight, hustle between
 dream's like veracity & my lonely heart
 the sound of your shallow breath,
 the warmth of your pale-rose skin,
 the scent of your sexed body,
 the taste of this room because you filled
 it, & because you left.

You talk softly, low, hesitant voice,
 but yours, you're long gone, you talk.
 "What were you as a small boy,
 Francisco?"
 "As now, a painter."
 "That small?"
 "My father was an architect, his eyes
 would construct & tear away everything
 he saw. Listen to music, passionate orchestras,
 & make mathematical notes in his ledger."

"And your mother?"

"When we were rich, she gave dancing lessons & held parties that devolved into orgy & broken glass. When we grew poor, as everyone did, she danced by herself. Eyes closed, remembering."

"Did they kiss?"

"They fucked. I dug a hole in the wall to watch. Him on top, his hard thighs smacking hers. Her on top, moaning, singing. Her hands in cuffs. His hard ass burned with wax."

She wants to laugh at all this & doesn't.

"You painted?"

"While we were still rich, our house was very big, & I would hide in its attic, amongst the trunks, boxes, mannequins, old maps & books, weaponry."

"You found something?"

"It was an old painting. A white birch in a moonlit clearing, deep in winter woods. It was damaged. Cut, scraped."

"What did you do?"

"I studied it for months. I dreamed about it. Finally, I showed it to them. Knocked on their door one night, their sex-noise was quieted."

She nods. Eyes wide. Mine closed, I see them. I don't have much longer.

"They didn't know it, claim it for a relative. It was the first thing I had asked them about. They were uncertain, unknowing how or what to say."

I pause, I *hmmm*. Please stay.

Let us finish this.

"I told them I would fix it, finish it,
if they bought me paints. This was a relief,
buying something for me."

"And did you?"

"I tried. I went slow. The moon above,
the sky, even most of the trees, were easy."

"But the white birch?"

"Yes. No. There were faces in its trunk."

"Faces?"

"Men. Women. Other kinds."

"Kinds?"

"In my dreams. They moved. Swayed, shifted.
Like a film but depthless. Endless. Some
happy, some morose, some tragic."

"How did you render that?"

"I didn't. In waking, the canvas's trees
had simply broken birch bark. No faces."

You're gone again. Nothing to hear,
nothing to touch, nothing to sniff.
No stump between my legs. My room
tastes empty.

I open my eyes. Speak. Finish our conversation.

"What became of the painting?" you ask.

"It was lost. Destroyed."

"How?"

"A fire."

"How?"

I smile at you, your absence. Your never-absence.

"I was younger. Even stupider with women.
One found me with another. Face deep
between her thighs. My tongue & cock were
wicked indeed back then."

You laugh. Your stump pushes up between
my legs, strokes, softly, harder at my cock.
Till I'm hard again, hopelessly hard.

I let you climb upon me, let your hips
find their liked place between mine,
almost feel you wetly maneuver me
in. Move my hips, sadder and sadder,
listen, no moans, *listen*, hear my father's
single pronouncement on women and love:
"You'll never stop chasing them, wanting
them. *Ever*. The rest of your time
for you to mold to worth. *Do it*."

I let go my cock, unspent. Listen new,
 naked, now, tell me. *Tell me.*
 Close my eyes. Drift. Come again to
 the old woman's ramshackle hut on wheels,
 where we negotiated over you. You were in
 my room, waiting me. She probably knew.

You are in bed with her. A great old
 comforter over you, firey crimson &
 black, unknown constellations, twin moons,
 strange creatures decorate it.
 You are younger, scared. Has she stolen you
 or does she protect you? Her hands
 roam your body, gently but appraising,
 but gently. She begins talking,
 softly, just some noises, click-clicks,
 but a few words too.

"The difference between need & knowing
 may sometimes seem obscure. You'll
 confuse the two. Everyone does."

Her fingers on your small breasts, rousing
 you, her fingers between your thighs,
 wet, wetter, then she leads your own
 fingers there, teaches, gently, thoroughly,
 you moan firstly & I hear all the times
 I made you moan, & you tuck into
 her embrace, close, insist, soon sleep,
 & what any of this but the old woman
 looks at me & says, "Do you understand
 the black cosmos now, Francisco? *Do you*
feel it? Would you want her still? *Would you*
waste your years in this wanting?"

"What else? What else but her absence
 & this wanting?"
"The white birch, Francisco. Find the white birch.
Finish your painting of it."

xxx. *In the Meantime / Some Other Time*

I wake amongst my students. The girls.
 The boys are gone. "We couldn't wake you.
 They came for them." Pretty faces, fear twisted.



I gather them to me, new wanting them,
 despite all. Calming them, letting them
 pleasure me for distraction. Taking my turns.
 In place of farewell.

I have to go. Three blank canvases, two for
 failed tries. My paints, my brushes.
 Few clothes. Look slowly around my chamber,
 its view of woods, mountains, sea.
 Am I returning?

Leaving the city isn't something one does
 of whim. There's tech monitoring every
 moving speck of dirt, every sentient gesture.
 I've been nobody until now, a painter,
 a teacher. A series of revolving numbers.

There are those who dwell on the edges
 of the city, half mythical, half mathematics.
 They cross the border mostly unchallenged.
 I knew one of these. He'd served my parents
 when I was a child but was turned away
 when we grew poor. Exiled back to these Cross Lands.

Beyond the city is what happens to a world
 destroyed over many centuries by a knowing,
 complicit hand, many generations of hands.
 The greater green world come back to claim
 what wrecked & abandoned, begun the gestating
 of a post-human world. From our polluting
 blackness will come surer, greener. Stranger,
 looser. Men no longer to shape, to limit.

Come night, the Cross Lands less guarded,
 more fires, looser magic. Make your cross
 if desperate enough, or a fool. I keep
 to the shadows, the chance to find my friend
 held in my open palm, the pink stone shaped
 like a slouched heart, given me that night he left.

I was a boy, understood nothing but the love
 in a touch & the terror in departure.
 His shaggy, rare smiling face had tended
 me when nobody else around.

Rarely spoke, to me or anyone, with words.
 When he did, slow, struggled. But his large
 hands bathed & dressed me when I was small,
 showed me how as I grew. Walked me
 among the great garden bordering our
 land, taught me the how of plants & sun,
 water & seeds. Carried my snoring form
 back to my bed, *hmmming* me into dreams,
 asking nothing of me until the day he left.

“Keep this with you always. For me,
 your friend. Come a day when you need me,
 come to the Cross Lands, hold it out
 before you. When I am near, it will
 glow. Very near, it will beat, sing, &
 I will come to you.”

I cried & he held me. Thrilling power
 in his grasp. I cried till I slept, or
 he crooned me so. Woke to workmen
 in my room, packing & discarding
 my young life.

I creep among ruins, sick trees,
 grey bushes, stone in hand, yes,
 I had run away many times & looked
 for him, stopped looking, never given up.

Far into the night, the risen full moon
 exposing me & my lessing hopes. Could I cross
 without him? Should I return to my
 students? Unpack my canvases before
 a single fragment of tech became disquiet
 with my absence?

I sit somewhere. There was a house here.
 Broken statues, pages of leather volumes,
 a random busted drawer of a girl's lace
 intimates. Pink, red, yellow, black,
 for her moods & moments. Seems a good
 place to despair, return home.

My stone glows, barely, but warms
 too in my palm! I nearly drop it
 in my happiness! Walk toward a nearby
 hill, deeper into the Cross Lands.
 Deeper glow, warmer, I feel him
 again, his hairy hands & face, his
 low voice. Grow younger, happily.

The stony hill, once climbed, gives me view
 closer the distant Woods than
 ever before not in my dreams. *Beat,*
beat-beat, beat, beat-beat. There
 he is, halfway down the other side.
 Slumped low, on a log. Totally alone.

I climb down slowly, ecstatic, afraid.
 He's much larger than he had been,
 more like a Beast now than ever, yet
 the servant in him rejected & dismissed.

No right words. So these: "Hello again."
 He doesn't move.
 "How are you?"
 "No longer a servant. Happier for that."
 "Do you hold against me?"
 A pause. "No. You're nothing to me." His words
 no longer a struggle. "Then or now."

"Would you guide me across?"
 "There's nothing for men there."
 "There's nothing for me here."
 Silence. Nothing but a single chance here.
 I talk.

"I loved a girl & sent her away. I am sad
 beyond comfort. But there's something
 I have to do. I beg your help in this."

Silence. As I am wondering how else
 to do this, he stands. Begins to lope
 ahead, something like a titanic wolf.

I follow, run, lag. Stop, recover my breath.
 Quickly shed my bag of clothes, extra
 canvases. Just paints, brushes, one canvas
 tied to my rucksack. One chance to get it
 right will be enough. Stone's light in my palm
 is fading. I run & run.

xxxi. Seasonal

Am I awake? These the White Woods
 at last? Do I dream? Do I yet live?
 Breath sweating, heart drenched, seems so,
 yes. My friend does not slow until
 we are deep within. No paths here.
 None would stick. I hold my stone,
 its faint beacon, & hurry ever slower.

Stand. Simply stand. Looking for a *white birch*
in a White Woods. I want to cry
 for the fool of it all, laugh too.

Then remember the boys who laughed &
 painted in my class, now taken to war.
 The girls they blushed & what ruin to a young
 heart to see your friends taken away.
 Life too soon convincing you of its
 inevitable consume.

But unwilling to run again. My old friend
 will companion me now or he'd done
 me the kindness of getting me here. Walking
 less apace, I feel again the peace here,
 it's not manful & therefore trees are
 trees, the Woods not squeezed & again
 for its last prized juice.

Come into a clearing where my friend
 sits at fire. I find a kneeling place
 on its other side.

He talks again, gazing the skies. "I like
 the moon at first slice, & a wet night
 like this one, on my beard, beneath
 my ass. The air slow & calm."

I nod, wondering at this great Beast &
 how he once stood at table waiting
 my mother's word, my father's command.

He talks on. "I look for freshly fell logs
 like this one & wait for her. As you see
 me, naked, muddied chest & arms from
 my runnings." Pauses. Looks around
 with the sweet wonder of a child.

"I listen. *She won't come*. I don't listen.
She may pass by."

Recalls me, this night, like a reluctant
breath. "There was a storm, she seemed
near," he whispers. Lost in his memory's darker night.

"Why did you serve my parents?" I say,
recovered to my own search.
He looks fully at me, shock, but the same
wonder. "It was her, Francisco. She believed
that the world & men could be reconciled.
'We all belong here, together,' she'd say
to me. 'Tell them.'"

Coughs. "So I went to your world &
was found a freak, a monster. My food
poisoned to keep me docile. Till your parents
grew poor & turned me out again."

"Did you tell them? What she said?"
"I tried, at first. But her words seemed
too pretty, too green for the men's metal world
I now inhabited. I tended you & long
let that be my task."

"And gave me your stone." Silence.
"Is that why she won't come to you?
You failed her as emissary?"
More silence.

I want to comfort him. "You were kind
to me. That's never a waste in this world.
You've brought me here, looking for my own
love. Perhaps I can do here what you
failed there." I put my hand on his furred
slumped shoulder. "*Help me now.*"

"How?"
"There is a white birch."
"There are many."
"This one's trunk has moving faces upon
it. Men, women, other kinds."
"What would you have with it?"
"I would paint it."
"Why?"
"I am bid too."

His great shaggy face looks up at me,
 bit of the wonder in it, alarmingly
 blue eyes. Breathes in, out. Reaches up
 his hand to me. "I'm sorry I had to
 leave you." I nod. "I'll find your tree.
 You'll speak . . . to her . . . for me?"

No longer his young charge, him no longer
 my servant. Now just hers. Like me &
 mine. Complete our bargain in first light
 & he lifts me, a bit like old, carries me to a cave
 of his devising. Lets me sleep alone
 among his leaves & sheered fur. Doesn't
 sleep himself, even by daylight. She might
 come. Then he'll show her me. And explain.

xxxii. Nocturne By Cave

*Still the dream enraptures me.
 Still I believe in something.
 Long past, still not ready, to call it Godd.
 No, it's a taste, a sniff, the last sound
 in a quiet valley's day.
 Skin, smooth as sea foam, warm as
 summer's night wind on my cheek.
 First snowfall decorating my hair.
 Everything touches, that's why.*

"Let them watch you bathe," I say,
 feeling her skin rosen in the shifting
 breeze. She holds her pose for me,
 hands awkwardly framing her breast.
 Nipples still hard from my lips, pussy still
 glistening from long holding me in her.
 "Let them watch," I hiss, shrouded
 as them to her in my way. I keep
 sketching as the dirty lookers linger.
 "Again, when they go?" she purrs.

Who? Which? I wake. I finished the girl
 & kept the picture. Like so many others,
 she poses for another now, or better yet
 sleeps quiet smiling in loving arms.

Feel around in the dark, my rucksack,
 paints & brushes, my canvas tied to it.
 I hold these to me. Probably doze again.

*My cat, my bats, my several faces.
 My cold dark mare called Dream.
 My easel where what happens is like music.
 My room's best late hours when drunken voices
 pass near, praising friendship, damning love.
 I listen, I paint their cracked hearts
 into her face, whichever her, stroke by stroke.*

*I slept head down in my arms at my table
 as often as abed. These were the good years.
 I smiled into sleep. We all play there.*

*Again, awake. Sweat upon my single canvas.
 My friend is with me. His eyes glowing
 as eyes oughtn't in this pitch. But kind.
 Not wanting, needing, giving to get. Kind
 to me because we both exist, because the world
 is, because to cluster, because to dance,
 because to touch, open hands, shared meals,
 & you come, & you, stranger, come too.*

Holds a cup closely to my hands.
 Speaks again in my language with his strange
 Beast's tongue. "Drink this, brother, &
 maintain your life, & paint again.
 It is a drink to renew your deep hunger,
 soothe open your rusted pores, your deeper
 thoughts, your ascending lusts."

I drink, burns me, burns me harder,
 lights in my veins, bruised & sorrowful
 places I've long not seen. He talks,
 he croons, "*To live is to wave your arms
 wildly, blink your eyes deep in the night,
 breathe heavy & light by will & whim.*"

"Tis my gift to you, my old friend,
 this drink. You'll not see me again,
 beneath that thin slice of moon, the sweat
 on my ass, the stone I led you by."



Silence. "The night remains. Sleep into
 my gift. Wake into it. Remember
 the music, remember it well.
 Sing it as you go from here, it will
 lead you to your wished place.
 Goodbye, Francisco, my friend, my love."

xxxiii. Travel, Alone, White Woods

The night, still heavy & beautiful,
 as I crawl from the cave, my friend's
 drink deepening in me, bites when I stiffen,
 when I try to curl within, *just let, a little
 more. Stand now, Francisco, begin
 to move.*

Yet I see. Distinguish the trunks &
 the spaces between, darkness inviting
 me along, mine eyes not impeding. Feeling
 my rucksack solid on my back, stars too big
 & close above, yet benign, I move along.
 Feels good, like I am let, like my will
 to do is regarded.

Oh. It's the low *hmmmmmm* in my throat.
 I had not known it was there. Did my
 friend? Yes, he did. So I *hmmm*, so
 I move. This is not me wakeful, nor
 is this me back in that cave.

Voices, tiny, cackling, gnattering voices
 in the night. I listen. Merry cacophony.
"The air is swift & vain!"
"Tis cold but not ice!"
"I can only breathe or sleep!"
"Your third foot is tickling my ass!"
*"Taste the shell, like cherry, like smoke,
 like dancing on wet sand by new moon!"*
"My hair should flutter that way!"
"Your hair is swift & vain!"

I feel a thousand little kisses prickle
 my face as their voices fade & I move on.

I keep moving, tho feel less my feet,
 or my body, do I sleep, will I
 disappear entirely? *Hmmm* higher,
 lower, something grasps me within,
 would have a better look at what I am.

A blur, I keep *hmmming*, hopeful, desperate,
 & open my eyes. My old room! My
 easel. It was a beloved night, I feel
 myself occupying it again. We drank
 wine & I painted you a picture from
 my rare light-hearted dream.

Two comical figures on my canvas, are they
 men or fantasticas? One smaller, but sure
 muscular legs. The other heavier, a lovely
 laugh upon his face. The smaller has an
 apparatus upon his back, a sort of strapped-
 upon-him seat? The heavier one half
 tucked into it, laughing them both into
 this new conveyance. Their next travel.

You watch this picture reveal itself,
 laugh as much as these figures. My last
 trick is a nod, a wink, & the two figures
 tip their bowler caps to you &
 blow far gone through raised dust.

“How?” you ask. Your eyes wonder what
 I cannot do. Were it so. My memories
 themselves distort to love you better than
 I did.

The stars have relented a little now.
 The night lets up in my blood & eyes.
 We let each other go slowly, my friend’s
 drink is finishing, the *hmmm* in my throat
 is fading down into my heart. I am
 approaching what I seek, all this play
 has gentled my sad travel.

What will painting this picture do,
 if aught, to return you to me?
 What have I to give you but my regrets
 & lingering vain needs?
 What do I have more to offer now than days
 when my friend washed my paints from
 my face & nails?
 What am I to sing my expectations to
 this magical, eternal place?
 How can I paint in one or a thousand
 canvases the tender porcelain beauties
 of this world, its ferocious wonders?
 How do I say well enough, often enough,
 ever & always, *I'm sorry, I love you,*
I'm sorry, I love you?

My feet again beneath me, the light
 crackling in like a newfound stream,
 I stop. Behold, *my, my, my.* The White Birch.

xxxiv. Into the Dark

*"If there's no one beside you
 When your soul embarks
 Then I'll follow you into the dark."*
 —Death Cab for Cutie, 2005.

She smiles at me. Hair down, a purr in her eyes.
 Turquoise eyes. Wet lips. *Speak. I'll listen this time.*

"There is no center to break nor edge
 to run over," she whispers, fingers on my
 shoulder, resting. "All goes on & on," her whisper
 softer, wetter. I nod, yes, *listen*. "Time neither
 recurring nor beginning nor ending." Hand now
 on my leg, but softly. I let a little, to see what:
 her bed in this dream. Let her continue.

"All is, continuously. Before, there is
 another before; after, another after,
 & so on." A quick breath, a giggle? & she is
 atop me, agile for a single-footed girl.
 Listens my thoughts, laughs.

"How this & me standing before your White Birch too?"
 "How, Francisco?"
 "I closed my eyes?"

"Is your easel set up?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so."

"And your single canvas?"

"Yes."

"And yet you are dreaming me too? A good night?"

"A very good one. Another I am sad to remember."

"Sad?"

"Painting this picture won't bring you back to me, will it?"

"I'm here?"

"Not in my dreams."

"What else, Francisco?"

I tempt to open my eyes & let this go, but don't.

"What then? Why come here? Why paint this canvas?" "*Finish* the canvas, Francisco." "I don't understand."

"You want to help your friend?"

"Yes."

"You want to stop hurting over me?"

"If I can't have you?"

"Yes. Francisco. I am gone. I'm sorry."

"How can I stop hurting?"

"By forgetting."

"How?"

"By finishing your painting."

"I don't understand."

"You want to help your friend. Show his beloved that you were worth his love & service? Win her again?"

"Yes."

"Finish your painting, Francisco.

Every stroke will let me go, forget me with all your love, & your sacrifice will show your worth."

"I don't understand."

"Let me go. *Finish your painting.*"

I open my eyes. Moonlit clearing,
deep in winter Woods. White Birch.

Look at my canvas, start. It's cut,
damaged, as the one I painted, as the one
I lost so long ago.

I try to cohere. My brushes, my paints.
I am Francisco. Here I sought for you.
 This clearing. That White Birch.
 Here I let you go?

I nod, unknowing, but how to paint.
 The light is moody for my task,
 diffuse, like clouds tremor discontent
 across the moon's face.

I begin, slowly. Work around the edges.
 Remember how I found this, that other,
 canvas, in the attic, how I worked
 on it relentlessly. But then less &
 less over time.

"I never did finish it," I say softly
 to whatever resides this clearing
 with me right now, watches or listens.
 "My first canvas & I never finished
 it. Like I was holding back, saving something."

More of the painting fills in, the Woods
 about me, a mix of minute detailing &
 casual scratchings. "And somehow you
 knew this, know it." I smile, the tree
 giving me its shape, its movement, the air
 it grips & curls about.

Look around. Shake my head. It's true.
 Each stroke I am leaving you. She
 watches me. His beloved. As mine going.

I could not teach my students to do
 what I am doing, to breathe by my brush
 closer & closer to you, beautiful White Birch,
 amongst your equally beautiful companions.

She watches & I have to speak. "I don't
 know if what I am doing is more for his
 winning you back or for my own heart's
 forgetting."

"He never lost me."

"He thinks he did."

"Francisco, were you listening to her?"

I laugh. "I heard the words. But I was
tasting her in my heart. The wise words
exploding in my mind. *Do you understand?*
I will forget & thus become another man."

She is quiet again, satisfied? Perhaps
loped along to find him. I hope so.

The painting is near done, but would
not be one of mine if I didn't apply
my old servant's, my friend's, trick to it.
Taught to amuse a sleepless boy, he didn't
know canvases were static. Thus mine
move, would speak, dream, travel,
if I will.

You are the central face I render in
the tree's trunk of moving images. You
are smiling just for me. You are speaking
to me again &, yes, I listen &, yes,
I touch & taste & explode worlds out
to you, wherever you may be.

Stroke: "You will live forever."

Stroke: "You will one day become that
glaring, glowing, soft, biting, diffuse place
you simply paint tonight."

Last stroke: "Before then you'll be watched
by another, play his clue & key."

Stare for a long time at my canvas. Someone
is watching. A man? Two?

What a beautiful place to come to.
How did I come here?
Who told me of it?
Who is the beautiful face smiling
in my painting's White Birch trunk?

Do they know?

xxxv. Self-Portrait: Despair

*"I drift into the great unknown
I really don't know where I'm going."*

—Lord Huron, "Fool for Love," 2015.

They approach. A tall, thin man in a
long coat, walking with a strange, thick
staff. A girl, I think. Her layers of
clothing show me little, make me wonder
much. But who are these?

The tall man smiles slightly at me, looks
toward my canvas. "My, my, my.
You paint an elegant loving picture of
what you see here."

"And it . . . moves?" says the girl.
Just one quiet sniff & I decide: girl enough.

The canvas's White Birch bears faces,
human & otherwise, that shift in position,
expression. The clearing & Woods beyond
also move slightly, the light shifts
with the sky's slight movements. Still,
central is the girl's face, smiling at me.
For me?

I begin to breathe hard, too hard, stagger
& would fall but they catch me, lead
me to the tree I rendered, sit me by
its several close trunks, the big one &
its smaller mates. I sit heavily, dizzily.

"Have you eaten, drunk today?"

"I . . . don't know."

They feed me nuts, small bits of fruit,
have me chew slowly. Sip water. Her eyes are
warm, kind, I worry less about what
her clothes shroud. His face is intelligent,
knowing. Yet presumes nothing but to tender
me. I calm. I feel how far from calm
I was as I do.



“Are you from the city too?”
 They shake their heads. “We came by boat.”
 “Boat? But we aren’t near the sea.”
 “We’ve walked awhile since we landed,”
 she says softly. They can’t help but
 trade a glance between them.

I smile, hand them back their water
 bottle, sack of food. Want to take
 my canvas & go.

But . . . go where? However I got myself
 out to these Woods, I can’t go back.
 These strangers, & my painting, are all
 I’ve got. I sigh, & release.

“My city was overrun. I teach painting
 by trade. My students were conscripted.
 Maybe I knocked my head, since I don’t
 remember how I got out here.”

They listen intensely.

“I can’t go back. Would you let me travel
 with you awhile?” I stop, smile, *try*.
 “I’m Francisco.”

They don’t seem surprised by my request.
 Each stands up, and offers me a hand up.
 Something settled among us.

We leave the White Birch & its clearing,
 & proceed single file through these pathless
 White Woods. Dreamwalker, he calls himself,
 first, then me, then Asoyadonna is her
 strange name. Me in the middle,
 as though protected, or the weak one.
 I can’t say they’re wrong. My gaped memory,
 me in the Woods with a canvas & paints to bide me.

“Where were you bound when you found me?”
 I ask him. Unsure their intimacy,
 but careful of it.

She answers anyway. "It's not a place.
 It's more like we're looking for others."
 "Others?"
 "Others like us?" She smiles at me, like
 the word hasn't been contrived for her meaning.
 "Brothers," Dreamwalker says, briefly,
 keeping his pace. But continues: "We found
 each other, & now we've found you."

I stop. Look at them. "I'm essentially
 a homeless man with a single canvas
 for my possessions. What kind of brother
 can I make to you but a needful one?"

Dreamwalker bids me unstrap my canvas
 for a look. We lean it against a less
 imposing white tree.

"Regard its six leaves."
 "Yes."
 "Is that all the tree bore?"
 "Um?"

Dreamwalker grimaces at me. "Francisco,
 we are three of these leaves."
 "Three?"

Asoyadonna smiles her witching smile
 at me. "By your painting's count,
 we have three to find."

They wait quietly for me to shoulder my
 canvas again, & we move on. Dreamwalker,
 I notice, is *hmmming* softly but with
 purpose.

I go with them because I have no home
 to return to. I feel weakened by
 my memory's holes, as though my body
 itself weakened. But they feed me,
 we sleep close together & they *hmmm*
 me into my dreams. Waiting there,
 too, for me, but when I'm ready.

xxxvi. *Self-Portrait: Hope*

When I let in dreams, finally, to my
 new friends, it isn't clear quite that
 we are dreaming. We sit together,
 in these same Woods, in a clearing,
 big enough for a fire. They eschew meat,
 it seems, but we have plenty of nuts
 & fruits. I concede this easily. What Creature
 would I harm in this strange Woods?
 I feel better thinking this, & couldn't say
 why. They lead me, I accept this, will
 maybe prove my worth anon.

Others join us, in this dream, but
 as though welcomed & easy friends.
 A White Bunny, her eyes trancing to behold.
 A tiny gnattering thing, too, like a panda
 bear contrived by several raindrops. A turtle
 too, of some unknown kind. Not quite, I think.

They sit between Dreamwalker &
 Asoyadonna, but all sniff in my direction.
 Doubting, to know better? I lower my head,
 wishing myself a distance from too-worthy
 friends & witching Creatures of the Woods.

Untie my canvas, set it on my knees
 to study. Not the leaves, not the
 softly moving trees. The face, beautiful
 face, looking at me. I speak to you.

"Why am I here? This special place,
 these people?"
 "They are your brothers, Francisco,
 you are dear among them. That's enough
 for now."
 "And who are you? *Why can't I remember?*"

She smiles at me so deeply I shudder,
 shudder harder, cry out my despair.
 This canvas is all I've lost, left behind.

"It's proof of your worth, Francisco,"
 says Dreamwalker.
 "Not that it needs proving," smiles
 Asoyadonna.

The Creatures now gather around me as
 I tuck away my canvas. Sit severally
 in my lap, trusting, affectionate. Soon
 napping. Potent beings, fragile & small
 yet also impossibly old, older then men,
 of this world yet perhaps not native to it?

I wake. They sleep yet. No light yet
 in all the White Woods. I could go.
 My canvas & I & my doubts could be
 gone in these pathless White Woods
 & not to be discovered again.

I remember her smile in my dream,
 the napping Creatures in my lap.
 My friends' sleeping faces are open, mysterious,
 but not cloaked from me. They *are* what
 they seem. Mine to know better.

My brothers. What this means, why,
 I don't know. But *something*, a way
 to begin, continue.

I speak aloud, waking them.
 "I need more canvases."
 "Francisco?"
 "And paints. Brushes too. Let's find a village
 in these Woods. Or out of them would
 be fine too. You mentioned the sea?"

They nod. Begin to laugh. They will find
 me my painter's tools.



* * * * *



Love in Puerto Rico

[Travel Journal]

I.

My intestines spasmed twice with a clenching iron grip in its dysentery delight. This is a fine mutant strain I acquired from a waste-water hose at an EPA lab. One gulp is all it took in a frantic moment of dehydration. My mouth, the Gobi desert.

Now I sit crumpled on the porcelain bowl like an oversized wad of toilet paper . . . brooding. Brooding about the girlfriend in the next room. She doesn't give a shit, I think, as I spray a quart of foulness below me. She's really thinking about going back to *him*, the macho bald bastard with all the big screen TVs, computers, and sports cars.

My ass is strangely clean for all the vileness it expels. I sand it down for the fifteenth time with what seems like 20-grit sand paper. Splashing my sweat-covered face in the sink, then twisting the exhaust fan onto high turbo, I pull myself together and go back into the room with the computers, with her in it. As I walk in, a screen of chat suddenly disappears.

"Who's that?" I ask.

"What? What do you mean?" A nervous note in her voice.

"Who you were just chatting with? Who was it?"

"Oh . . . all these liars are always trying to chat with me. I didn't really notice."

She's lying. Another lie. Who knows a god-damned liar better than the sneaky pathological queen of lies herself. The lie sits in the air between us like an unidentified fart in a transport van.

"You don't have to go, ya know," I say with a low growl

"What do you mean?"

"You could go stay with your mother. Or go back to *him*!" Save me about a thousand dollars, I'm thinking.

"I don't want to go back to him," she whines. "I came here to be with *you*."

She lies. Again. She's probably been dissing me on the 'net with him seven seconds ago.

"Just giving you a way out . . . if you want it. It will be hard, ya know. I wanna hack through the jungle. Explore. We're talking bugs and branches here." Silence follows my statement.

Finally she says without a shred of commitment, "I wanna do that tooooo." A nasal quality to the last word.

"I need an enthusiastic partner, ya know. It would be good if you were into *something*!" I snap back.

She hasn't been into jack shit since she fled here from her S&M relationship with the egomaniac. A steady diet of coffee, cigarettes, and clandestine chat on the computer. She's read no books. Blabbed constantly about the injustice of her old boyfriend, *the asshole* she calls him. She sleeps all the goddamned time. It's like pulling hair on a two-year-old to go for a walk around the block.

"I can get into things. I'm interested in stuff. I want to learn." The whiny tone again.

"What are you interested in?" I demand.

"I made a list of hotels there. I dunno . . . I'm just in a sort of a slump now." Yeah, heard this before to explain the lack of electrical activity in the cranium.

What's with the hotels? Does she think I'm Paul Allen? I want to sleep in the jungle. Commune with the tropical tangle of foliage. Breathe the breath of primordial life. Dodge the snakes and spiders. Find the lost Spanish treasure.

This is not happening in her mind. She thinks this is a vacation to beach hotels, \$20 drinks with an umbrella, served by an obeisant dark skinned person.

My ass feels like an air hose has been rammed into it. The guts are rumbling. It's time again. "Squooze me. Gotta use the room."

II.

Puerto Rico. The expatriate's dream of easy living. Everything cheap. Tropical beaches all around to live on like Robinson Crusoe. No federal taxes. A hideout from the northern chill and the teeming urgency of a commodity-driven society. I promised myself I would go. Maybe never come back.

I promised to take her with me a few months back, when things looked brighter. When there was love. Where is the love now? We disrespect each other. To me, she is a lazy millstone. An arm-ornament at best. At ten years younger, she still has a porn star figure. Wild and disrespectful hair. She is beautiful. Exudes sexual excitement. Acts affectionate. But there is no touching now. I am gray, overweight, starting to ache and make groaning noises when I get up. A typical older man. A mark. A guy with some cash to blow. A guy with a vacation to absorb. I know she'll dump me like a cold stone in winter when we get back. I repulse her now. I stink despite my best efforts.

I'm an obsolete grumpy bastard, wallowing in the knowledge of my withering demise. My impending dumping. Along with this sordid sentence, the trots. One big stinking asshole, crawling with bacteria. That's me. About as appealing as licking a dog turd. I feel doomed. I'll take her to Puerto Rico, but I know my fate. A date with a dumping. Hopefully, I can find a refuge there, where I can hide from my country, the insidious police, Homeland Insecurity, my dysfunctional family, the friends that I don't have. Maybe I can find peace, find love. I must try.

After interminable airplane hours of open ocean, land is in sight. It seemed like the pilot took a left somewhere and was headed to Morocco. But below is the Island. The island of hope. The housing looks queer from the air. There are hundreds of shacks of various rusty mismatched corrugated roofs. The roofs are densely clustered and misaligned to each other. Like street confetti after a parade. Swampy areas with their own confetti garbage meander through the windrows of roof rubble.

The city of San Juan comes into view below. These buildings are bigger but do not exceed two stories. They also are flung on the land in disarray. Streets run in random between the trashy buildings, as though we look down on a huge worm ball the dog coughed up.

There's the runway at last. Black rubber streaks mark the concrete, contrasting to the grass sprouting from cracks at 90 degrees to them. A sort of apocalyptic geo-tartan. Banking the plane at too low an elevation, the captain begins his final approach. There's a few moments of terror filled with screeching tires and the roar of reverse jets. The wings dip side to side like a boat in white caps, then the plane slows and regains control. A party cheer erupts from the Puerto Ricans packed in the plane. Everyone is clapping and congratulating. What is this? Is a successful landing unusual here? I join in the cheer. I'm glad to be on the ground.

III.

Inside the airport the walls are lined with arcade games. Men and boys vigorously play these, thumping the sides appropriately to maneuver the ball. Why are they here? Do they come here to play? How do they get through security with all those quarters? All the signs are in Spanish and have multiple arrows pointing in different directions. At least there's some directions. We follow the debarking herd down to a lower level. The floor is tile, covered in water. It is slippery as hell. Has there been a flood? It is musky and humid with a wet dog smell.

"I think this is condensation," she says. Adept, I think. Makes sense, but I do not praise her observation.

Our luggage is last on the rotating machine. No one checks a damn thing. I could have taken the nice luggage and gotten some new polyester pants. My denim has leak stains now. I know I stink, but there are a hundred new stink odors. I can blame my brown odoriferous cloud on them. Must find the bathroom. Praise Allah for the international symbols of man and woman. The sign cryptically says *Cabollos*. I would have thought this was just for bullfighters if not for the icon.

Inside is 1950. More dripping tile. Bespattered mirrors. Pull-paper strewn. No sparkling urinals with radar sensors for when you zip up; only old partially rusted plumbing with a germ-covered handles. I secure myself in a stall on a worn seat. No time to worry about the cultures growing there. I am my own voracious ecosystem of seething bacteria. I'm sure my vicious personal environment will exclude any microscopic encroachment attempts.

Explosively relieving my self, I pause here, resting my head in my hands as my guts clench and knot in its new found space. Eventually pull myself together and head for the sink. Only cold water, which is warm. No soap. One empty soap dispenser for ten sinks. I scrub my hands in the unknown water, and look for the paper towels. Empty. She is waiting outside, looking fearful.

IV.

There is no sign posted for our cheap auto rental reservation. Eventually a battered bus careens out of the four lanes of traffic and jerks to a stop at our location. The ride is my first taste of automobile operation here. The driver cuts in front of people and lunges headlong into traffic to make turns. I am impressed so much, I tip him a few dollars. He gives me a bewildered look but then smiles and happily pockets the money. Our rental car is red and has air conditioning. Civilization on wheels. There is a large dent in the rear bumper, a decent scratch a meter long down the side, and the side mirror is cracked. They ask me three times if I want the collision insurance. Why should I want that? I'm a great driver.

We make our way to the old quarter of San Juan. Massive walls surround the ancient city to ward off the ghosts of long distant pirates. The streets are 7/8th of a car width wide. I see now why the mirrors are hammered. I kiss a few parked car mirrors, gently of course, but most are cleaved off already, giving clearance to the tiny red car. The parked car mirrors hang as if eviscerated eyeballs on their optic cords, glinting in the slanting light. All signs are in Spanish.

After a few swerving excitements, where all the idiots are driving straight at me, I determine that *Una Via* means "one way" and not something about a party. Everything is one way, but at random, such that many streets must be passed to find one going in your direction.

Police are everywhere. There are police standing on corners, police going by in vans by the half dozen, police cars meandering in the street corridors with their lights twirling and flashing. Apparently this means nothing. They do this just because they can. No one pulls over. There is no place to pull over. Cars tailgate the police, the police tailgate everyone, and all are honking to

get things moving faster than the 5 MPH crawl in these canyons of antiquity. The uniforms are a mismatch of blue issue and personal camouflage pants or hats. All have guns, some rifles. Sinister automatic looking things. The pistols are of individual choice, generally being nickel-plated of large caliber. These are prominently displayed, coming halfway to the knee and well above the belt. I'm feeling a little paranoid and have to evacuate again. Time is running short. If one of them gets behind me with the lights going, I'll crap my pants for sure.

V.

We find our place by accident. It is a doorway off the street with a sign the size of a cigarette package. Incredibly, there is a parking place twenty feet away. A rusted iron gate made of half-inch bars is ajar just off the sidewalk. We go in. A tile-and-marble staircase leads up into darkness. On the second landing, a door is open to a smoke-filled room. A rotund balding fellow is shuffling about in what used to be a white t-shirt, now stained with food and lathered in sweat.

"Hello. Hello. We'd like a room please." Attracting his attention.

"Como?"

"A room. A room for the night. El rento." That's stupid and I know it.

"Ahhh. A room. Uno noche?"

"Yes . . . one night." Guessing what he said.

"Si. Hoe-K then. Want see room?"

I don't give a shit. Just want to shit. "Yes please," she says. What the hell are we going to do if she doesn't like it? There's no other place around. It's getting dark. We're starved. I'm sick. We have to take it.

We walk down some corridors and he unlocks a rusty padlock on a ten-foot-tall door. Inside is a single room about half the size of a gym with a ceiling twenty feet up. The walls are made of fourteen different types of paneling and plywood, some painted institutional green like an asylum. A single ragged cloth-wrapped wire runs up from a cracked switch that promises to shock the hell out of you in some foreign voltage. This controls the distant paddle fan hanging limply above. Proudly he twists the knob and the fan reluctantly begins to turn.

"See. Aero condition," he proudly announces. It is about 103 in the room. The fan pushes the hot air down as if a slow blowtorch. I wonder if this technology marvel will increase the room cost. A solitary double-bed stands in the middle of the room under the fan. Twisted black bedposts, a raft in a sea of elaborate tile work on the floor.

There are two sets of doors that are really large shutters that open out onto a deck with an iron railing. Beneath the railing are coils of barbed wire, apparently to keep out a criminal Spiderman. It is cooler out on the tiny platform with the updraft from the street. The porch hangs out from the building, suspended in space. I like it. This place has character. I feel like I'm Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca. She has a bewildered look. A mix of horror and astonishment.

"We'll take it. It's wonderful," I blurt out. An icy stare drills me from the woman.

"Eet iss fine then. Come with me," the proprietor says.

VI.

Forty-five dollars later and ample instructions in broken English on the bathroom, the keys for the front gate, the room padlock, and the mystery key, we are issued a half-roll of toilet paper. Back in the room, I marvel at the ancient tile-work paving the floor. A mix of Spanish and Moroccan design. Some Spanish greatness here . . . where conquistadors once strolled.

Then back out onto the porch where the people move about below, uncaring of my eagle's perch. The cars below cram bumper to bumper at a crawl up the narrow street, honking all the way, fists waving in the air, curses in an alien language. It is delightful. All the foreign and exotic I could have wished for. The pastel three- and four-story buildings lean over the skinny street in either direction, iron designs and odd corners jutting out everywhere. Little festoons of concertina wire hang like dust bunnies where some imagined burglar might clamber and trespass.

The ceiling fan paddles a draft of molten air on her, laying on the bed, pouting, sweating, saying nothing. What the hell is with that? Where is the excitement, the commentary, the enthusiasm? What a pisser. A let-down companion. A dirtbag moron. I head down the hall to the Caballero's bathroom. White wet tile paves the huge room. A battered sink, a toilet all alone on the other side of the room, a yellowed bathtub shower with one water handle. No soap. My body wrings itself out again like a kitchen dish rag. Roaches skitter in all directions mimicking the people of the street.

VII.

Hunger. Four in the afternoon of Day 2. Thinking a quaint café with crafted iron-work and different pastel walls. A nice menu in English announcing ethnic dishes of . . . what? I have no idea what the hell they eat around here. Haven't seen a single café anywhere. No Mom and Pop corner bistro, no mystery meat taco stands. Nothing. Just beer. Huge billboards decrying beer with ample white women barely clad, cuddling a beer to their breast. Every two blocks, an open-air beer cantina. A counter, a few tables, a few chairs, two walls, and twenty skinny shifty-looking men drinking beer. All standing. We need food. We are cranky.

"You'd think there'd be a Denny's or a Shari's around here somewhere," she says.

"I don't see any family restaurants," I comment.

"All I want is a steak. Medium rare." The chronic whine in her voice.

"Do you see any goddamned steaks out there? I haven't even seen any cows."

"Just because you haven't seen any cows doesn't mean there aren't any."

"Does it look like these people eat steak? Looks like they'd be lucky to eat dog. Do you see any dogs?"

"You don't have to be such a racist. We'll just eat what they eat." A punctuated pout in her voice.

"Yeah well, you just tell me what the fuck they eat!"

"I don't have to tell you shit!"

"That's cause you don't know shit."

Death silence. Frown lines cutting down her chin into the neck. A straight-ahead stony look.

"There's a damn McDonalds. You want a burger?" I groan.

"Yes."

VIII.

So again, another meal in the ubiquitous Micky Ds. Same crap, different planet. Nobody speaks English in these places. You have to flail your order to a sloe-eyed teenager. At least that's the same.

"Quatro cheese burgers, uno dinero menu." Pray the broken Spanish works with my waving hands.

“Como?”

“Ummm, carne. Cheese burgers?” Pointing wildly at the menu now but might as well be pointing out the star Sirius in a rainstorm. Holding up four fingers, I get out four dollars and wave them around. Now a spark in their eyes. Rich Americano. I have their attention but not their comprehension. Eventually the manager comes out of the back to translate the piddly order. We scarf the mush in the car and feel better. Back to being polite now. Until the next crisis.

Thinking fruit and vegetable stand. That would be nice. Where’s the iconic colorful market? Or a goddamned grocery store will do. Not a one in sight. Haven’t seen a single grocery store yet and we’ve been over 70% of the roads on this weird Island in the last few days. Where the hell do people get their food? What the hell do they eat here? Oh, for just one Safeway deli. Where’s the food? Where’s the Chinese take-out? There’s only these strange ramshackle roadside stands. These are built out of an assortment of odd boards and sheets of rusted metal. Not unlike a kid’s first tree fort.

A typical stand is hollowed out of the right-of-way thicket of jungle brush. Looks like a green cave. Trash is festooned in the bushes all around. The shack wares are only an odd assortment of plastic milk jugs, partially filled with colored fluids. What is this stuff? It exudes an aura of bacterial contamination. Who buys this stuff? What are ya going to pay for a glass of this mystery fluid? Twenty bucks to an obvious tourist maybe? Twenty-five cents to a local, I suspect. We’re not thirsty. I have sufficient bacteria already. The gaunt proprietors leer at us as we pass. The juice doesn’t seem to be doing jack shit for them. We need something to grind in our teeth. American filler and fat.

Another stand goes by, lathered in snagged plastic bags. Plastic bags waft playfully in the air currents of the highway like lost balloons at the fair. Plastic bags are all over the beaches and floating in the water, mimicking dead jelly fish. The bags are hung like fruit on every highway bush, drifted into aero-terrestrial mounds on the edges of all parking lots, flapping in the breeze in trees. This is the true Puerto Rican flag.

To be continued in Cenacle | 93 | June 2015



Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I’ve heard it in the chillest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of me.

* * *

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are—

None may teach it—Any—
'Tis the Seal Despair—
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air—

When it comes, the Landscape listens—
Shadows—hold their breath—
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death—

* * *

Ample make this Bed—
 Make this Bed with Awe—
 In it wait till Judgment break
 Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight—
 Be its Pillow round—
 Let no Sunrise' yellow noise
 Interrupt this Ground—

* * *

The Butterfly upon the Sky,
 That doesn't know its Name
 And hasn't any tax to pay
 And hasn't any Home
 Is just as high as you and I,
 And higher, I believe,
 So soar away and never sigh
 And that's the way to grieve—

* * *

So gay a Flower
 Bereaves the Mind
 As if it were a Woe—
 Is Beauty an Affliction—then?
 Tradition ought to know—

* * *

Beauty crowds me till I die
 Beauty mercy have on me
 But if I expire today
 Let it be in sight of thee—

* * *

In this short Life
 That only lasts an hour
 How much—how little—is
 Within our power

* * *

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
 One clover, and a bee,
 And revery.
 The revery alone will do,
 If bees are few.

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Notes from New England

[Commentary]

*“Please accept this ragged purse
of high notes.”*

The following continues the series originally called Notes from New England, begun in issue 24-25 (Winter 1998), then revived in issue 59 (October 2006) as Notes from the Northwest, & appearing since issue 75 (October 2010) under its original title. It is intended as a gathering-place for observations of various lengths upon the world around me. It will be culled, like much of my writing, from my notebooks, and perhaps these thoughts will be expanded upon sometimes as well.

Dream Raps, Volume Four

The Best Kind of Pilgrimage

The best kind of pilgrimage is the pilgrimage deep into the sea. Deep down into the sea. And if you go deep down into the sea, you will of course encounter Creatures of the deep-down-into-the-sea kind of nature. The kinds of Creatures who like it way down below. That is where they prefer to travel & to keep their company.

But you may ask yourself: *who are these Creatures that are living deep down below the sea, keeping their company there?* And so you swim up to them & ask, *who are you?* And they may sing out to you, there in the deep, deep sea where you have taken your pilgrimage. They may sing: *We are many, we are one. We are many, we are none. Come to our party. Come sing & dance with us!*

And thus you will have your answer, of a sort. What other kind of answer would you expect from the strange & wondrous Creatures who live deep down in the sea & keep company there?

Except to say one other thing: if you look behind them, there is a wall, a very steep wall. The wall reaches from deep down in the sea up, up through the depths to the very surface where it arrives, & you think to yourself: *my my my, what's all this? We are many, we are one. We are many, we are none. Come sing & dance!*

I Am Near the Festival Again

Oh man, I am near the festival again. And I'm one of the musicians. I've created this audio piece. It's two hours long, to be played later in the night, on the stage there on the cracked desert floor. Something always seems to be playing on that stage, save during the highest heat of the day. Its

back wall reaches high up into the sky, giving shade much of the day, is buried deep into the dusty earth.

At some point, I bring me & my beloved's boots inside some kind of building—some kind of room, a wooden box deep inside a hole in the floor—for safekeeping. And I write the letter **S** on the box, in dust.

Later on, I'm listening to a man telling his story of going to college, complications, stupid tragedies, ends of the world. Someone's world. I'm counseling him like the old days at the festival, & I'm remembering those old days, & I break down crying, remembering how I did this.

And finally it's night, & there's a band on the stage & I feel like I should know who they are. They're longhaired hippies dressed in crazy costumes. And they launch into a song called *The Pink Floyd*, which sounds like The Pink Floyd.

We go on next. Grand finale? *No. The festival never ends.*

And all of this is so intense. *You tell me dreams aren't real, you tell me dreams aren't real, you tell me dreams aren't real, you tell me dreams aren't real, you tell me dreams aren't real, you tell me dreams aren't real.*

I Must Be a Boy, Full of My Fires

I must be a boy, full of my fires, because there's a longhaired girl with golden boots on her small feet. But, more important to my world, there's her father. He's a teacher, & he doesn't like me. Isn't that always the way? Oh, first he has me read some student essays. *One, I say, is good, though is not relevant to the assignment. I would tell the student to start with the first sentence again, but keep the rest tucked away.*

Another essay just isn't very good. About a pilgrimage to the desert, or maybe a TV show about one, & then to the sea, or maybe just a bright pink cartoon dolphin riding the cartoon waves on that girl's low-cut halter top. They took a buggy ride. She wouldn't even kiss his cheek after.

But this teacher, father to the longhaired girl, doesn't like me no matter what I say or do. Somehow we end up together at a baseball game, behind the backstop. In this future or past time, players have to wear sandwich boards—which of course makes them clumsier to play, but adds advertising revenue to their teams' fortunes. One player's sandwich board reads: *ChocoSmax: Them's the Fax!* Another player's sandwich board reads: *We are many, we are one. We are many, we are none.*

The teacher takes it out on me, leveling criticism after criticism at me, as though it's all my fault. He takes all of this personally.

You've ruined the game of baseball! He cries, his eyes yellow with rage.
I say: *is there nothing you can do but disapprove?*

He says, *I'm old & you're fucking my daughter. And I'm old. And I'm old. And I'm old. And I'm old. And I'm old. And I'm old. And I'm old.*

One of Those Low-Budget Movies About Time Travel

It's like one of those low-budget movies where you're told it's about time travel but it never really goes anywhere. It kind of just all takes place in some guy's apartment. That's exactly what this was like . . .

There was this apartment building I was living in, & there were three apartments on the third floor, a small one & a big one & a medium one. And I seem to have lived in all of them from time to time. And the landlord's wife had a fondness for me, which was nice, especially when my rent was late.

But then what happened was that my credit card was stolen from the old wooden box I kept in the hole under my bed, & the thief ordered lots of pornography sent to me, & this did not go over well with the landlord's wife, who somehow got wind of what was being sent to me. Maybe she peeked, I don't know.

But later in the film—this was the time travel part—, we are in one of the apartments trying to get back in time to the other. It's one of those where you're told: *oh, it's forward in time—oh, it's back—my goodness! Look at the powdered wigs, look at the jet packs!* That kind of thing.

And then there is, of course, a heroine to this film, but she's not very bright &, as for escaping the pursuers, we end up at a baseball game & she doesn't understand that to get lost in the crowd, you have to swirl into the crowd & *get lost in it*. She sort of stays on the edge of the crowd uncertainly. She is not a very bright heroine. Longhaired, lovely, but little more. Once told me she believed she was born in a spaceship buried deep in the earth.

But, somehow, we make it back through space & time to the apartment. I find myself relieved. Further, I find myself sitting on a stool, on stage, in the big apartment, with Creatures, & we are performing. Some of them are leaping through a hole in the stage to perhaps another dimension, so one is told. It's that kind of film. I wonder if they'll come back for the Grand Finale, when we will all sing & dance on the stage together. I have a feeling they shall. For you see, they are professionals.

I Always Get Invited to These Kinds of Parties

You know, I always get invited to *these* kinds of parties. Now there are all sorts of kinds of parties. There's dress-up parties, costume parties, there's proms & wedding parties, & frat parties, & all sorts of things, but this is the kind of party that I get to go to.

Seems to be a kind of a family affair, all sorts of family members. Someone's family anyway. As I entered the biggest room in the great house where the party was held, I saw there moving images on the wall. I couldn't tell if these were films, or videos, or some kind of two-dimensional Creatures

in sort of a frame. It was hard to say.

And I suppose the party carried on for a while—there might have been dancing & singing. *Oh, no doubt, some got naked.* There was probably a body of water nearby, maybe the sea, maybe some jumped in, maybe it was the middle of the winter & they jumped in deep anyway with yowls of delight. Fireworks, of course. Mud, Jello, a nearby Woods where strange things happened. Maybe more came in than went out, or vice versa. *Things of this kind.*

And then there was the sort of a finale where this famous longhaired comedian came out, & he was going to put on his show, & he just was getting warmed up, telling his favorite fierce jokes, but his act was cut short. Someone cut his microphone, turned on the stereo, loud. I nodded. *Of course it's The Pink Floyd.*

His act was cut short because there were fanatics in the bunch. And they didn't like the comedian, they didn't like his style, they didn't like his face, they didn't like his long hair, they didn't like that he had ten fingers total on two hands.

And I'm not sure what happened to him, in the end, whether there was something that occurred in the Woods, or out to sea, or in the Jello. Among the naked people. *Things went down. Things happened. I don't know what happened.*

And all I can say is that eventually I end up back at my hotel room, unable to sleep from the events of the night, & from the kinds of parties I always get invited to. I sat there watching TV. It was a program about a town called 1971. One of the many you find on late-night TV where the lab blows up, the world ends, & only the Creatures are left, *again*, living on the lone habitable Island, deep in its magical White Woods, in the Great Cavern, caves & tunnels under the Tangled Gate.

Mrs. Wordsley

Everybody, it seems, has had a teacher like Mrs. Wordsley. Oh, she's not one of your regular teachers, she's not one of those that you have for all sorts of classes over the course of time & maybe you'd come to love her or hate her. No, she's your classic substitute teacher.

And you think, years later, how did this woman make a living? She showed up, occasionally, to substitute. It wasn't like she was there in different classes every day. She was just there randomly, once in a while.

She was strange, too. She'd walk around, carrying a strange wooden box. It had all sorts of symbols on it. You won't find them on the Google, or in big dictionaries, or in arcane volumes in the library. No, sir. It also looked like it had been through fire a couple times. There were scorch marks on it, a couple dents. It was a wooden box but it looked like it had sailed the seven seas.

And so that was Mrs. Wordsley. And this wouldn't any of it be very important except I was recalling the time that she made me stand up in class. *She didn't make people stand up in class. She didn't make people work.* She seemed far more interested in her box.

But she'd just got her hair cut, which spooked me from the moment she walked into class that morning, & she made me stand up in class & tell her what I had dreamed the night before. And I told her, I stood up, & I told her a dream. Now it wasn't my dream. I don't know if it was anybody's dream but it just occurred to me, in that minute, that sudden panic-filled minute when this substitute teacher ordered me to do this thing that I had never been ordered to do before.

I described climbing a rocky path, a very steep rocky path. It was both muddy & icy. It was very steep & there were many people along this path. And I wasn't sure where I was climbing to, but it seemed very important that I get up there, to the top &, if no other reason was involved, at least I wouldn't be on this slippery, muddy, icy path anymore. *Just begging gravity to take me down & with as much pain as possible.*

And I finished telling this dream that someone had had, maybe I've had it, I don't know but I don't think so. I looked at Mrs. Wordsley, but by the time I'd finished this now very long rendition of what had happened during this dream, she'd lost interest.

She was back sorting through her box, pulling out scraps of paper & other things, some of which possibly moved on their own. It was hard to say. So I just sat down & hoped it wouldn't happen again.

You were going to the sea, young man, she said. Reading shakily from a torn & scorched scrap taken from her box. *Don't you know anything about dreams, young man? Don't you know that dreams are real?*

I Leap from a Building

I leap from a building, drop toward the ground, slow, & land fine. You see, I'm hurrying to finish my classes. I've got to get that college degree finally. I'm going to go work in an office, & I'm going to have a job with a tie & a suitcase & a hat upon my head, but I've got to take five classes, plus take two make-up exams, & possibly jumping jacks.

And that's just how it has to be. College these days isn't the easy thing it was back when I didn't finish it. Along the way, I go into a club & there are two pool sharks. They beat me easy but I get worked up, say: *I do poetry the way you do pool. Let's teach each other.*

Now these pool sharks have never been approached like this. Usually people fear them, & for good reason, but maybe it was just the tone of my voice, maybe I said it just right, humble & forthrightly, maybe just the right amount of Fraggles in me.

But they liked it indeed, & we began an alliance that day that continued the rest of my college career & it helped out too. You see, I was living in an apartment in a poor, dangerous neighborhood. Its living room floor—such as you could call it a living room—was just a hole, a declivity in the earth. People would come in & would tell me how to cover it up, or fill it in, & none of it made any sense whatsoever.



Finally I just say *to hell with it* & set up a movie projector & we show horror films in the declivity. One of them ends with a lab blowing up, & the end of the world, & the beginning of a new one, & I'm so glad I got that college education.

I'm Sitting at My Old Bar

I'm sitting at my old bar, at my old corner stool, with my glass of ice water, & there's a man, sitting a couple stools away.

Now he's a man who has seen his best days come & go, or so it seems, & he's drinking directly from the bottle that the barman left for him, understanding that need tonight.

He starts talking eventually, saying it had taken him a long time but he had managed to pull together the suit that he was wearing at that moment. He explains that it was a combination of about three or four suits that were too beaten up to wear respectably, & so what he did was take the best pieces of each—a lapel here, a button there—and pulled them together into what he was wearing at that moment.

I give him a fair assessment because I figure that's what he wants, & I say: *I think it'll do, looks good.* He nods, he knows. It was a lot of work, it was a struggle.

He explains that he's on his way to the transport plane. He explains that there's a division of passengers among roles. There's the artists & the cooks, the poets & the felons, there's the counselors, on & on, like that. Roles. And like passenger sits with like passenger for the duration of the trip.

I say: *when does the plane leave & from where?* And he says: *I know it's soon & I know it's near but that's all I can say. But when I finish this bottle, I'm going to walk out into that daylight street in my suit, & I'm going to take a sniff of the air, a big sniff, & I'm going to follow it until I find that plane & join the other passengers on board.*

You Walk Around as Three People

You know, it's often times true that you walk around as three people. And sometimes these three people are the past, the present, & the future. And sometimes what happens is that you're in a state of mind where they all mix in together, one plus two plus three.

I am in a neighborhood, full of houses, apartment buildings, sidewalks & stores, cars on the street, flag poles in the air, clouds in the sky. I go into a used bookstore, oh yes, this again. It's nice. I walk around for awhile. I don't buy anything, maybe I don't have any money. It often was true in this past present & future that I'm describing.

I comfort myself by memorizing poems to recite to my longhaired lover on the nights she'll come see me, crutch holding her up on her footless right side. I select a book with no cover or title page & read to myself, then speak quietly, over & over: *Who are these Creatures that are living deep down*

below the sea, keeping their company there? And so you swim up to them & ask, who are you? And they may sing out to you, there in the deep, deep sea where you have taken your pilgrimage. They may sing: We are many, we are one. We are many, we are none. Come to our party. Come sing & dance with us!

Maybe she will kiss my cheek twice when I recite these words to her. Better than the usual twisted silent hour in the dark.

I then go visit old friends that live next door. *Oh, this is a treat.* I have not seen these old friends in decades. They are friendly & welcoming. *Whoo hoo! Whoo hoo!* I say. It's been a long time.

I talk about the art we used to make together & I wished that we'd had better equipment to make it. I tell my friends: *you're so lucky to have a bookstore so close to you, next door.*

But after awhile, sitting in their warm living room, a friendly soft light, music on the stereo, over & over an album called *Mellow Moods & Moments with The Pink Floyd*. I begin to feel trapped. Like, I have to go. This is wonderful. *I have to go. Why would I think that? Why would that be true? What would be the secret to that feeling?* I don't know.

But I go. And I don't look back. Because, you see, when you're three people, past present & future all at once, you don't need to look back, because it is swirling all around you & inside you all the time.

A Friendship That Transcends . . .

It is sometimes fortunate that one has a friendship that transcends time, space, & sense itself. I'm friends with the dead singer. He is not yet dead. We are good friends, & we have other friends too. We gather many nights in a known & familiar room, & know nothing of our various ascents & descents to come.

And so I'm with the dead singer, who's not yet dead, & his friends, driving in a top-down black sedan, out deep in the desert. *Oh! The good times you can have with friends in a top-down black sedan out in the desert, deep in the desert!* It's so far out there, so flat & far from anywhere else, that it's like non-time-travel, like nothing passes, quietly, beautifully, crazy like you can just simply sniff the clean dry air itself, & know that whatever you've lost will come to you again. A pilgrimage into the one & many & everything you are.

Eventually, I find that we are no longer in a top-down black sedan but in a buggy race in the deep desert. Buggies are going every which way, it's almost chaos, how can you tell who's winning & who's losing? How would you know? I grip my wheel & drive hard nonetheless, & try not to crash, & eventually I come to a hill.

Strangely, I drive up the hill. I come to the finish line shack. I've come in fourth place, & I'm feeling very triumphant, but the newly-shorn lady in the shack only wants her \$180 entry fee. That's all. I look around cagily & notice there is a store behind her. I say: *does that store have an ATM machine?* She says it does.

I get out of the buggy & go into the store. Then I slip & slide my way through the store, find a set of stairs that take me down back to the desert floor, & I make away without paying my entry fee.

Later I give a call to the dead singer who is not dead. And I say to him, *thank you, that was such a good time & I came in fourth place*. But I warn him not to become a tragical symbol for his generation. I say to him, quite honestly, *that would be a waste*.

Known & Familiar Room

Now here you are again, in that known & familiar room, among those known & familiar souls from yesteryear. And you are among them, knowing how the years have played out since then, & they do not.

Yet you are with them, among them, a familiar among familiars. The high-high singer, the smirking preacher, the belly-laughing poet, the many brilliant brothers we were. Do you say or do you refrain? What do you do with the knowledge you have? Can you affect things, can you make them better, or just different?

Do you give them the gift of not knowing because you've traveled back to a good night among loved ones & fellows in a good place, or do you take it away? Do you look at each face, & then the next face, & take it away because you know?

Or do you forget for a length of time, just a little length of time, & enjoy this miracle of having traveled back to their company before they run divergent & some down low? Do you enjoy this company of your yesteryear fellows? Is there enough Fraggles in you to enjoy it for as long as it will last?

You're Smoking Something Good on TV

Now you know what happens sometimes is that you're sitting at home in your living room or your bedroom, or maybe you're living in a studio apartment & they're all one & the same, & you're watching something good on TV.

Something funny, something that when you sit there & smoke something good, & watch this good thing on TV, they seem the same. It's like you're smoking something good & watching something good, but it's a twinned sensation. I'm smoking this TV show, this TV show is smoking my pipe, we are smoking together. *We feel together, we're very high together*.

It's very nice, it's sweet, you don't need anyone else in the world but your pipe full of sweet ganja & your TV show, your couch or your floor. There might be a window, there might not be a window, who knows what kind of place you're living in?

You do your best, you work hard, or you don't have a job, it's hard to say. You go through situations, one then the next. Anyway, you run out of good edibles. You've got the show, you've got the pipe,

you've got the ganja, you've got everything, but you've nothing good to eat. Cheese Doodles, ChocoSmax, things like that. Things that are good to reach into because it's a bag full of them & you can eat them, one at a time, in between smoking & watching & laughing.

So you have to go to the local store. Now you've heard things about this local store. It's open 24 hours a day, in your little town where *nothing* is open 24 hours a day. And you've heard stories about this store, that it's actually part of a spaceship. It's like the topmost part of a giant spaceship buried deep in the earth.

And you walk in, & you're looking for ChocoSmax or Cheese Doodles, or things like that that will help you with your friendly pleasing solitary high whether you have a job or don't have a job, whether you have a window or don't have a window.

And you walk in & you think to yourself: *is this really the top part of a spaceship that is buried deep in the earth? Could this be?* You look around stealthily & you see in the back of the store there is a door. Now it could just go back into the place where they keep the mops & the brooms, or maybe it goes back into the cooler because you've got to stock the soda & the milk even when you're making the kind of crap money that they pay you at this kind of job.

Still. You walk through that door & there are stairs down—oh, & the guy at the counter, he's a friend of yours, & he's not watching anyway, a couple of girls came in & they are wearing halter tops, that was it, he's not watching nothing else. So you go in & you go down, step after step after step.

You come to the bottom of the steps, & there's a keypad, & there's a door, & you can get into this spaceship if you know the code. And you think to yourself: *what is the code?* He won't be talking to those girls forever, they'll get bored & they'll leave & he'll come looking for you, because you were talking to him earlier & promised him some good weed when his shift is done, or possibly during. Who can tell? It's a long night, third shift, though you do have to get back to your TV show & you do have your ChocoSmax & Cheese Doodles in hand now.

You think to yourself: *I had a dream last night, were there numbers in it? Yes, there were numbers in it! There was a festival, deep in the desert, & heavy rock music on stages everywhere (including The Pink Floyd & The Pink Floyd Too), & it was a chaos until the bands began to synch up, a few at a time, then all of them, every band, every stage, synching up, the drums first, the bass guitars, then the keyboards swirled into place, the lead guitars, & the singers, so many singers! Singing, chanting, humming, words in & around us, we are many, we are one, we are many, we are none!*

Furiously you type these numbers into the key pad—*many, one, many, none*—& you hit the **enter** button, & you just hope, & a little green light comes on, & you push the door in! *You are inside the spaceship, my friend. Go take a look. And a listen. Is that the sound of the sea?*

Martina Newberry


Women Like Me

will not know fame or big money
but we hoard dreams & dare to pray for them

blink into the face of war after war
& plant tomatoes in hanging baskets

& decide on a new skin care plan
& pay our bills & buy new socks

are afraid of becoming our mothers
understand that our real fear is Time

negotiate blessings, patterns, partners
bathe in age's awkwardness

listen to the little confidences
telling themselves to strangers

who stare at us unabashedly and wonder
who we are—who we *think* we are

walk the roads we believe we have coming
learn that Rt. 66 actually goes nowhere

sing "Amazing Grace" over & over again
in tremulous little voices until someone

gives us a dollar to stop. Sometimes that dollar
is all that stands between us & sanity.

* * *

Morton Avenue

A friend told me: "If you can stand
this world for one day, you'll live
forever." Ah! he was right.
The phantasm of you still
causes me doubt as to whether
or not I ever belonged here.

Revenant, phantasm, bleak
dry sand of my soul, I can
scarce forget the fury
of you and the blankness after.
No apologies—more
like seizures of exoneration . . .

Man of black eyes and monster hands,
I remember when I stopped
loving you. It was a Tuesday.
I no longer wanted to know
what you knew, stopped listening
for something magic in your voice.

I stopped searching for
the location of your heart
and searched instead for smiles and
slim bodies elsewhere. I found them.
We always find what we're looking
for, don't we? That's all I know.
71 years on Planet Earth and that's really all I know.

* * *

Pelican

For just a moment the silhouette of
a pelican stays almost still against

the sun. It is that orange time of day when
it seems as if all the world's trees are on fire

tearing at the clouds with fragrant, burning fingers.
Not my favorite time of day. 5 pm

proves that I am not the only living
argument in favor of trepidation.

The pelican is not afraid—not of
flight nor of failure. Its only fear is

hunger and it vanquishes that with every
dive and stab at the darkening water below.

* * *

Bargain Day at St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop

I think it's OK to spend some time waiting.
I am waiting for those who can afford
to buy what I'm selling: nostalgia, backward
glances, longing, and denial. These things
don't come cheap, you understand.
Those who can afford them are on their way.
I know it.

* * * * *





No Link Found Between Psychedelics & Psychosis

[Essay]

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Data from population surveys in the United States challenge public fears that psychedelic drugs such as LSD can lead to psychosis and other mental-health conditions, and to increased risk of suicide, two studies have found.^{1, 2}

In the first study, clinical psychologists Pål-Ørjan Johansen and Teri Suzanne Krebs, both at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, scoured data from the U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), an annual random sample of the general population, and analyzed answers from more than 135,000 people who took part in surveys from 2008 to 2011.

Of those, 14% described themselves as having used at any point in their lives any of the three “classic” psychedelics: LSD, psilocybin (the active ingredient in so-called “magic mushrooms”) and mescaline (found in the peyote and San Pedro cacti). The researchers found that individuals in this group were not at increased risk of developing 11 indicators of mental-health problems such as schizophrenia, psychosis, depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide attempts. Their paper appears in the March 2015 issue of the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*.¹

The findings are likely to raise eyebrows. Fears that psychedelics can lead to psychosis date to the 1960s, with widespread reports of “acid casualties” in the mainstream news. But Krebs says that because psychotic disorders are relatively prevalent, affecting about one in 50 people, correlations can often be mistaken for causations. “Psychedelics are psychologically intense, and many people will blame anything that happens for the rest of their lives on a psychedelic experience.”

The three substances Johansen and Krebs looked at all act through the brain’s serotonin 2A receptor. The authors did not include ketamine, PCP, MDMA, fly agaric mushrooms, DMT, or other drugs that fall broadly into the category of hallucinogens, because they act on other receptors and have different modes of biochemical action. Ketamine and PCP, for example, act on the NMDA receptor, and are both known to be addictive and to cause severe physical harms (such as damage to the bladder).³

“Absolutely, people can become addicted to drugs like ketamine or PCP, and the effects can be very destructive. We restricted our study to the ‘classic psychedelics’ to clarify the findings,” says Johansen.

“This study assures us that there were not widespread ‘acid casualties’ in the 1960s,” says Charles Grob, a pediatric psychiatrist at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has long has advocated the therapeutic use of psychedelics, such as administering psilocybin to

treat anxiety in terminal-stage cancer.⁴ But he has concerns about Krebs and Johansen's overall conclusions, he says, because individual cases of adverse effects can and do occur.

For example, people may develop hallucinogen persisting perception disorder (HPPD), a "trip" that never seems to end, involving incessant distortions in the visual field, shimmering lights and colored dots. "I've seen a number of people with these symptoms following a psychedelic experience, and it can be a very serious condition," says Grob.

Krebs and Johansen, however, point to studies that have found symptoms of HPPD in people who have never used psychedelics.⁵

The second of the new two studies, also published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*,² looked at 190,000 NSDUH respondents from 2008 to 2012. It also found that the classic psychedelics were not associated with adverse mental-health outcomes. In addition, it found that people who had used LSD and psilocybin had lower lifetime rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts.

"We are not claiming that no individuals have ever been harmed by psychedelics," says author Matthew Johnson, an associate professor in the Behavioral Pharmacology Research Unit at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. "Anecdotes about acid casualties can be very powerful—but these instances are rare," he says. At the population level, he says, the data suggest that the harms of psychedelics "have been overstated."

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* * * * *

Tom Sheehan**Late Watering**

Men at watering divine
the pulse in it, douse petals
much as root work, believe
them cleaner, deserving.

In hill shanks, between
other's houses, as August
suns filter down, these men
let go, how thick hawsers

unwind in naval dusk.
Often they train harshly
on leaf, stubborn blade,
and lose the water's act.

They stare at that fighting
back. When twilit cars
pass in salute, slowed by
evening's deed, watering

men fix where water empties
itself, at earth-damp,
at the heeded and awful
promise of return.

* * *

No Diminishing Returns

We talk fifty miles over wire, a mile
for each year since our eyes touched.
Legends still vibrate in your voice, fables,
story of a stray star, Atlantis provoked,
burst meadow beyond the hill, bedding down,
a tree counting the darkness, flower in a field
of rye. I remember a winter clean as salt,
memorialized snow banks, foreign country

of a couch thickly green and awkward
as landed amphibian, a blue wool skirt
of accordion pleats I blew smoke into,
my ear on its blue sky listening to stars
inside, eyes closed, mouth opened,
stretching, reaching, turning corners.

* * *

Once You Shared But Darkness

Twilight lashes us,
which always wasn't this way,
this step in another direction.

Now my mouth
is against your wetness
and all you've shaken loose.

I hear you say
you have waited
forever for this talk of mine.

Never again
will I argue for the hours
we have lost getting here.

* * * * *



Raymond Souldard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

xxiv.

They stand, the boys zip up, the girl tugs down her short white skirt far as it goes, not much. Shy, suddenly, when moments before she had them wet, twisted, fingers & lips & orifices unsolvable among each other, a sort of three-headed groan monster, she wants them to lead. And each to take one of her hands of course.

The lobby is dark. Door locked from outside before midnight showing of **RemoteLand** begins. 'Goers learn to prop a rock in it to keep it open. It's painted orange & everyone is told. So they can get back in.

She hasn't been outside the theater, is the truth. Didn't come this way. Doesn't know what to expect. Sex with these two boys is sweet & easy compared to this.

Behind them, in the now-seemingly empty theater, the next film begins its first run.

The title it doesn't list anywhere is *More Fun*—is it a sequel? I don't know. Is it the next day? I don't know.

I am in a pickup, in the passenger seat. Next to me, two friends, one a heavy blonde man I knew a couple of decades ago, his name is Bill. Between us, another blonde, a girl. Pretty. But we're not calm.

We're on the run. Not sure what. The air itself is troubled, visibly ruffled, like it's damaged.

Driving slow past a shopping mall, imploded, rubble. Smoking.

"Drive."

"Why? That's all we've found, for a thousand miles."

"Drive!"

The truck speeds up some, but not enough. I reach by the girl, grab his throat.

"Fucking-drive-or-get-the-fuck-out" squeeze harder with each syllable.

He floors it. My hand withdraws, slowly traveling across her tight t-shirt, braless beneath. She holds her breath to keep from reacting aloud.

I was alone, camped in the Woods, a clearing I sometimes dreamt was shaped like a temple, if the moon

was full. Every way into my clearing was rigged to snare the intruder.

I heard them before they appeared. They were fighting. She was ahead of him, so tripped first. I disengaged the spiked net so she merely tumbled into my arms. Her sweater still buttoned up back then, him no longer earning a good look.

Her in my grasp, but still one hand free to point my gun at him.

“Don’t hurt her. We mean you no harm, I swear!”

“Sit. On the ground. *Now*. On your hands.” He did. Already, his claim of her was slipping. She shifted in my arms, but only for comfort.

I chose to keep her, & he was part of this choice for the moment. I fed them. Handing him some dried meat, fruits, berries. Fed her myself. She chewed slowly, holding my eyes. Turquoise eyes. Chewing slowly.

Had they really been together? For a little while, it seemed. She lost her people, needed a man’s protection badly.

But he didn’t take it from her & she didn’t find him attractive enough to offer herself. Settled for traveling together.

I could probably have simply left with her, or at worst wounded him enough to leave.

But I didn’t. The rules of this new world weren’t clear. I’d been with girls before, but this one was a thousand times more. So he was a kind of buffer while I sussed & decided. I pretended to acknowledge they were together in a meaningful sense, & to accept this. She wasn’t the kind of girl who begged, or even asked, as I said.

I simply teased her. Kept feeding her by hand, as that first time. Found casual reasons to touch her, mark her mine for later take, if I chose. If *we* chose, really.

By the time we were passing by that imploded mall, she’d chosen.

But I hadn’t. To claim her how I could would de-cock him in a way men don’t survive unchanged.

I’m not telling it well. It was the broken air too. It was the burning landscape. It was whether only one man could protect a girl like this.

She watches me constantly from the side of her face. Won’t look fully at me but won’t look away.

I treat him like the man he isn’t as we make our campfire at night. Show him how I lay my snares & traps. For food, for enemies. She watches but I don’t teach her directly. I’m still choosing.

He knows nothing about survival. Once she withdrew from him, for good, it’s like his light doused & all left was smoke.

I could shoot him dead. Wound him crippled. Toss her over my shoulder & find a starlit clearing to have her. Pretty tits, high ass, tight pussy for my straight razor & long-lonely cock.

But I don’t. Days go by. We find a truck. I’m no mechanic but it’s only got a flat, a donut spare solves that for now, & a bent chassis, so we have to steer a little off center to go straight.

We drive & drive & drive. No hordes of zombies like we were told would ruin the world, or emerge from the ruining hand of men. No, most people were dead in the first month, their bodies disintegrating to dust weeks later. Nobody to bury, or to rise up.

The rest were left with a world of canned goods & enough batteries & portable generators to survive.

Not dead but, for a long time, weaker. Lethargic. Like this companion of mine. Surviving but nothing more.

And most never shook it off. See, that's the problem. She & I both did.

I tell it slant like this because it's how I figured it out. In pieces, not enough of them. I still don't know what killed most of us.

He floors it, briefly present, & we race through broken air. Then there's a noise from the engine. A crack! pop! & the truck seems to come loose. We slide wildly in our seats &, when the truck rights itself, her sweater sleeve is caught in the steering wheel.

Terrified, she screams, pulls, the truck veers hard to the right, we nearly roll but he presses the brakes easy enough to slow us, & we stop.

That night, another snared & trapped clearing, dimming embers of a fire, she crawls into my sleeping bag, damn near rips it sliding in. Kisses me just once, her tongue down my throat so deep my lungs get a taste, one hand pulling up her dress, the other tugging down my shorts, & more words than I've heard all these days: "put it in me now & screw me hard, or take your gun & broken truck & fucking go." I comply. One look into her turquoise eyes as first she cums, then me, then her again, tells me she's nobody like I thought.

Luckily, he hears our loud sex-noise, takes my gun, & goes.

xxv.

Pack up, drive on. She's calmer now, not happy but at least paying attention, not just blindly furious.

Tank running low, limp to a filling station. Not as simple as they once were. Gasoline, power, food, water, hire a whore, an assassin, try to find others to travel with, campsite, smoking tents. Only rule: check your guns & weapons at the door.

So we're in line for fuel, long line. She talks, still hasn't much, tho I know she has a tongue & a voice from our sex hours.

Wants a soda. "Chervanill," she says, some angle of accent I don't know. I pay one of the boys hanging around to wait with our truck; he leers at her. I don't blame him but he's not getting any.

Hold her hand in the market, a half-fallen-down building attached to several large tents. She likes this, it's a gesture of possession, of safety. Get her her drink, pay more for a clean cup & straw. I listen to conversations, looking for some entry, something useful in all the hate & ignorance—

Meet a man with maps, good ones, rare ones. He wants good money in return, & her in a private room for a little while. She won't look at me, would go with him if I said.

"No."

"No? You're wasting my time. You know someone will take her sooner or later. With me you get some value. And I don't just like to hurt for fun."

"No."

His face softens. He's young, these aren't his maps fairly. More desperate than bad.

"Take me with you."

"No."

He unfolds one of his maps, it's very old. Old words on it even tell how to use it.

"Songs. You have to sing the right songs or the landscape remains cloaked. You pass through unknowing its truths."

She's not looking at me hard. Willing to risk him for these maps.

"You touch her, one of us will have to die because of it. Am I clear?"

Nods. Cock's not that hard up yet.

Her turquoise eyes find mine. There's a vague smile in them.

xxvi.

He says we have to leave the truck. Not sell it, not even give it away. We have to travel by caravan. We stay two days till one passes through.

Travelers are generous & kind but will not take on most who ask. He makes us wait at a distance while he negotiates. They agree.

Travelers don't sell their women or girls, or use them for bait or bargaining. They assess them when they join up, what skills & arts they have, what crafts, & set to teaching them what they don't know. Men are taught but only if they can find a willing teacher.

Our companion is little seen. Won't tell me how he spends his days. I make myself useful & repair things, clean weapons, wash dishes, build morning fires. I finally tell one of the elders when he asks.

"We're bound somewhere. I didn't think she would make it whole."

"You could stay with us instead."

His offer is made with little enthusiasm. He sees my path better than I see my own.

"You'll lose her eventually."

"Even if I stay?"

"I'm sorry."

I try not to believe him. But her smile & confidence grow day by day. The other is rarely around. What do I offer that this secure family of Travelers does not have & better?

Finally, our companion comes back. Holding a leather book filled with pages upon pages of numbers.

"We're close. We need to break off tomorrow morning. Tell her."

"She may not come."

His expression is fury. "Do you want to live this dangerous, dirty life always? Does she? *Tell her.*"

She returns to our bed late, tired, smiling. Rolls naked into my arms to sleep, willing on nights when I am.

"He says we're close. We leave tomorrow."

Her soft body stiffens but no words.

"I can't make you. You have a kind of home here."

Nothing. Then: "Can I make you stay?"

"No." She rolls away from me but still holding my hand. By when I wake up she has us packed & ready to go.

xxvii.

"He was my postman."

I wake & it's still night. Quiet. The camp is guarded all hours so I don't divide my thoughts to her safety, as I have so long. Almost. Remind myself not to.

"Who?"

"He brought me the letter telling me my father died."

I listen.

"It was a hot day, you remember. I invited him in for a lemonade. He liked my halter tops, I let him look. Nothing else. No words. But I was feeling weird that day, & the letter he handed me looked disturbingly personal."

The tent is dark, not a candle, not a crack in the seams. Helps him to sleep & stay alert both all night. When we fuck I want us to cum together, it's a discipline I want us to have. I listen now with that level of attention. A bad noise, a misspent cum.

"It was from my Aunt. She & my father raised me together. She still lived in that village, ran the big garden of the hotel. She was kind of a witch, tho her practices were her own."

Takes my hand in hers, twines our fingers. Breathes. Talks on.

"He & I had become separated. There was a war. He made sure I was safe. Years later, I came back to Aunt & her garden."

Words rushed, trying to explain years in a few seconds, a couple of sentences. I squeeze her hand, tight, once.

"I loved him. I always thought of him. He was a tinker, very smart, very sweet."

Harder breathing, what comes.

"He'd gotten old, gotten sick. By when he made his way back to her, it was to die in a bed, with a loved face nearby.

"She tried her tricks, tried them all. And it was quick, no time to find & fetch me.

"So she told him she'd make sure I knew. He wished not, but agreed. Had one request of her.

"Tell her who she is, all of it. It will help her."

She has something in her hand, makes me feel it too. "Her letter. The rest. I stopped reading at that

moment. Put it in my pocket. Why should my postman see me learning what I am?”

I feel it, poke my finger inside the envelope, several pages.

“Then all of this happened. He protected me, the postman. He could have run, over & over, but he didn’t.”

“Then why me?”

“I wanted a man who could read that letter to me & be strong enough to handle it.”

“Why do you think that’s me?”

“You could have had me from that first day. Shot him, forced me. You know all this.”

I’m silent. Measuring futures & possibilities. Honest with myself, & hating it, she’s in all of them.

“Should I read it now?”

“No. Don’t ask. Sometime after now, just pull me somewhere private, & tell me it’s time. I always have it near me.”

Then the letter is gone from my hand, and she is atop me, & I am driving deep & slow inside her, & thinking, as much as I have left, there is no possible future without her.

She makes me cum first, forces it out of me, laughs, holds me close, her turn a slow moaning cum in my ear. Laughs more.

xxviii.

Write it deep believing, that’s how I see it tonight, another year begun, my pen moving, pages one then the next—

Deep believing, this is what I am, what I do, world emerges from these pages, we possess each other, the moment, the hour, the passing years—

Been reading old notebooks of these stories, what it was, what I was, what it is, what I am. Seeing where the old rivers still have rivulets by which to connect now.

Connect is what I want, resume, continue, remix, renew.

I want to give deep believing to it all, find ways with characters, locales, welcome them back, & carry on, find a way. I can’t always do this in my commonplace world, there are people I love who yet live & yet lost to me.

So Art where I can do something when I can’t always do something outside the printed page.

Does this make sense? Is it enough? It’s only one angle on all this, not enough by far to keep it worth my efforts, & yet atwist in the rest. A trace here & there.

Today I looked up at a rock wall, covered in ice, water dripping down within the ice, dark-colored drips as though descending fishes.

I watched the ocean & loved it simply. Its swishing sounds are beautiful. It’s beautiful to watch. The

sand carved abstract by wind, water, how cold the atmosphere, the ways it reacts to all of these.

Nature creates Beauty by what it does. Beauty emerges from its actions. *Art is what it is.* What belief, deep or otherwise, does it need?

I can only return to & continue these pages, moment by hour by year. *Art is what I am, I believe.*

It is my will that crosses the last gap.

Does this make sense? Is it enough?

Yes. I choose it to be.

xxix.

One more: when I writhed in that hotel room, angry at what I'd helped the worst of life create in me, what rottenness I let stink slightly still in my mind's nose, was the white birch outside my window that kept me along the hours. In a parking lot, near a closed-up newspaper building, raining, me ranting & watching, ranting & watching, was the White Birch kept me along till I unlocked that door, walked into the winter cool, touched that White Birch, & kept walking back to my pen & paper, on & on—

xxxi.

It was a place where those running or hiding could come, & the harder the run, the more terrified the hide, the deeper it went. I wondered if some ever left really, there were ways to stay even if one's purse was empty, ways to clean one's self, scrub as hard as was needed, if one wished, spoke a word—

Thieves, killers, brutalizers of every kind? Yes. Only their past days & activities snapped off at the door. It wasn't possible to carry on like that here. Something prevented it, something in the roots & walls & windows & doors of the place. The food. The water. The air itself.

And if you left, thinking to resume elsewhere? It wouldn't work as well for you. The lust for another's possessions, to hurt him for his merry grin, her for her thick lips & darting eyes, it was blooded. Still there, nothing kills it till the man lies bones & buried, but thinner, scattered—

Other thoughts occurred. The world was less a brazen cage to be moved through. Kindness? Empathy? Can even the deepest green magic in the world grant these, or revive their corpses in a grim man's heart? Not wholly. But not wholly not.

The sun needs just a break in the grey mass to shine through. Any moment now.

Some rent little cottages with two rooms & yards. Some have never had yards before. Little gardens in back. A few fruit trees. Learn to tend a living thing not man-shaped, nurture & love it. Eat of it or see it decay eventually back to earth.

How it responds to shine, to water, to your voice & touch. *Learn & learn & still more to know.*

Her name is Evelyn, & she is a brunette, my first in a sad history of artful blondes. She moves me in because I have nothing to bring but my clothes, my man's body she hungers, & a small satchel I can't lose ever.

This place she lives, these little cottages, the smiling poor folk who live in them. Gardens, trees—I don't know how to assess it.



"These kind of folks do not have such housekeeping?"

"Such?"

"Quietly prosperous. Safe. Smiling on neighbors. Nobody in fear."

"You like it?"

I nod. I'd only meant to walk her from the tavern to her door, wherever that happened to be.

I hadn't. Not really. There was one, we were very young. Her red hair, her freckles. Me wanting to worship her. Her wanting suck & fuck, with a laugh. I would have but they moved. In a night, gone.

Always looked for her. Why I traveled. Why I learned to fire guns, fell trees, fix furniture. Sing old old story songs. Dance. I kept thinking she'd show up & I would be ready now.

Had I since? Yes, there'd been two in a night. Mine the young hard cock to orchestrate them. Enjoyed me. *Loved* each other. At least now I knew how it felt.

And every so often but whenever one sought mine eyes in hers, tried to synch both our hearts & our bodies, I came, & left. Quickly.

Evelyn does not have red hair nor the blondes I've said of.

Her body is still young, breasts small & high, pussy a trimmed design, licking instructions? I comply. She enjoys.

But she keeps me in between her thighs longer & longer, me nearly cumming, her riding me up & down my own crests, laughing, something, when ready we moan it deep & out together. One night of it. Two. Weeks of it. Neighbors smiling, greeting me by name.

Then a night the door slams open & a big bald bruiser comes in. Loud, laughing. She lifts me through the air to her closet, deepest corner. Goes out to him. Some shouting. More. A gun shot.

I wait. He'll kill me or me him, or her already the murderer.

She comes in. Smiling. "He's gone."

I walk into the main room of her house, expecting a warm corpse. Something.

Nothing. Sits me on her couch, still smiling. Has an old & much-treasured box in her hands. To show me. Reveal me now.

She's a Traveler, I learn, as most of these folks are. The man had not been. Had claimed her by a recent occupation of this town, now over.

Her box full of picture postcards. These her prizes.

"Not mine mostly. Others pass through. I tell them about my collection. They want to contribute. Build something among our kind."

They are different shapes & sizes. Some of thick, crude paper. Some of much more velvet stuff. Drawings of inns, of forests, of gardens, of mountains. Of a region's important face.

Her hands push her box to the floor as they crawl upon me. She wants sex, hard, fast. I want to know what she feels for me.

"I'm no Traveler. I'm just lost. Looking for someone."

"I know," she whispers, pushing me to the rug-covered dirt floor.

"You're not her," I whisper, my fingers betraying me on her breasts, hips, smooth slides into her cunt.

"I know," she whispers. "But I'm here. Maybe we can find her later for you."

xxxii.

We travel, the three of us now, my man jealous & unsure, & our guide, who'd risk all for half an hour with my bare ass raised high. Twenty minutes. Five.

But he doesn't get it. I let him close enough for a sniff of the girl, especially when my man has recently well-enjoyed me. But no more. Still, enough of a vague promise to keep us together bound somewhere good.

We'd sit in countryside nights between towns, studying the maps.

Why not an inn? It was me. Most men were no longer like the postman, or my man, or even the weasel guiding us who had a hidden gun on him & could have used it.

I would have let him just to shut him up wanting it. But some men get addicted. Would mistake a pity fuck for love.

They were afraid, because as we got closer to somewhere in those maps, fewer the laws.

That last night before we hit the sea air, I felt them following all day. Feigned fatigue & illness frequently to stall us. A couple of sleeping herbs in their drinks.

I presented at his tent. Didn't trust any building in his region. His predecessor had.

Bearded, long-haired. But furs. A cock in them somewhere but it all was to awe challengers or their women.

He smiled. Not cruelly. We talked before we fucked.

"How do you know I won't kill them & keep you?"

"I know you loved your wife."

He starts.

"I know you didn't have a chance to say goodbye."

He lunges but at himself.

I bid him douse the lights, wait. I undress, sit on his lap, feed him what I had brought. Some drink too.

"I am not her. I would not insult or fool you. But tonight we will say goodbye to her & you will let her go & keep her."

I'm back in his grasp before either groggily wakes. The path to the water remains safe that day, & we arrive.

Where we're bound, the Island, is no sane place. But it's where he wishes to go, what drives him.

And the weasel-faced one? He smells another man's seed on me & wonders darkly. But says nothing. Knows there's prizes & powers to be gained where we're bound. The kind to claim my sweet ass, & my man's too, if his will & whim. And it might be.

I know better than either of them, but say nothing. Choose the power of silence, watching, listening.

Wonder if my long ago dreams of this Island have any truth in them? That I remember every last detail like the spit in my own mouth?

xxxiii.

Party after party. No real Killer. Just this strange adult game of hide & seek called The Realist. Christina grows bored. This means more often horny. This attracts the attention of more men. She tempts. Tempts. No, not really. Wishes she did. Be more fun to make Kinley a little jealous. The regular kind, not cosmic gate-of-the-universe kind.

"Why are we still with him, Kinley?"

"Who?"

"*Fuck. Who? The Gate-fucking Keeper?*"

He looks at me plain, clear, like he only usually does as he's cumming in me.

"Where are we, Christina?"

"A hotel room. Dressing for our next pointless weekend party."

"Why aren't we in the Gate?"

Oh. "We . . . left?"

"He's hidden it from us. This is the Gate but we can't see it."

I think. "So we want back in?"

He nods. "He outsmarted me. I thought we were free of him."

"Is The Realist his game?"

Kinley's quiet. Again. More.

"It's not his film. But it's like he's something to do with it."

I'm not always a tender girl, mostly because I heat fast when the man is close to me. With Kinley, not even that close.

But, fuck it, I move from the bed to the room's old armchair. Hold out my arms. Kinley kneels before me, folds into my embrace.

"So we find the Killer & we're free of him?"

He nods silently into my chest.

"And he . . . drops us off at the Gate?"

Doesn't nod.

I lift his head to look at me. "Kinley, I'm with you. No matter what."

"The Gate is our chance to understand everything. The Gate-Keeper showed us more than we ever would have known."

"But how does this silly game show anything?"

"I don't know."

That night, we pull up in Kinley's red '70 Z6 Camaro in front of a house more like a castle.

Kinley is dressed in a dark tight suit, one I've convinced him to wear.

"We need women crawling over you. A few men too."

"Why? Don't you want all the crawlers?"

I laugh. "What I want is you happy again so you fuck me as I want."

"And?"

"It won't happen till this game is over & we're living in a tent in the Gate, traveling with those strange kitty kats & their dry-land fish."

He laughs. "I love you, Christina." Doesn't say it often enough for me.

"I love you too. Boxer briefs. I want your goods nicely packaged for marketing."

Me? I bring two dresses. The short tight black one, & the shorter, tighter red one.

The crowds are there. The daytime picnics are sweet, but then come the all-night drug-fueled sex raves. A little desperate for me. Like: will The Killer come tonight? The Real Killer? Like: will we be good enough? *Why not?*

What I don't tell Kinley is that I think I can find him. I think I know what he goes for. We're not at this party randomly, or by the Gate-Keeper's choice.

He doesn't kill at every party he goes to. Sometimes kills in only the regular symbolic way. I've figured all this out, in sweated clinches, with men and girls both, in the many parties we've gone to. I've had to lick a few bare cunts, a few trimmed ones, a few hairy ones too, swallow more than enough cum, but I've learned from people at the parties where he killed. Who he killed.

They were believers, arrogant, feeling like they were part of something special, *like they were special*.

Then I met a girl he hadn't killed. And she was disappointed. She would hardly tell me anything for a grope. I got down into it & licked her to cum over & over. Next party, I rolled her over on her flat little tummy & got my wet tongue in that tight asshole of hers. A couple of knocks at the door of our bedroom, I just pushed deeper in her, made her cry loud her orgasms. The knocks went away.

We'd have baths, smoking her really good hashish. She knew I wanted to hear her story about him. Just didn't know why.

We're shown to our rooms, as guests are offered at the more elaborate Realist parties. Since we dressed at the motel already, it is only a matter of dropping off our two small bags, washing our faces, & leaving.

But he stops me at the door. Again, the look in my eyes. Almost doesn't talk.

"What? Tell me."

"I could be the Killer if we needed."

"You are, aren't you? At least sometimes." I don't pay attention to the rules.

"I mean the real one. I think that would end his hold on us."

Wow! Smacked & not the fun kind.

I pull him into my face by his ear. "Kill one person for real, Kinley, & I will close my legs on you forever."

He's about to shrug when I say, "And my heart." That does it. I kiss him anyway, & we enter the game. Separate quickly. Easier for me to operate.

I find her fairly quickly. She's been looking for me. Her perfect tanned face is wrinkled as we find an unused room.

Shaking. Hard.

"What? *Tell me.*"

"He's here. *He's here.*"

"Tonight? This party?"

She's terrified. She's . . . giddy.

"You want him to this time?"

She nods. Her dress short as mine, much lower cut. My tongue rebels & remembers the taste of those sweet hard nipples. Sucking the tiny clit till she glowed with moans & cums.

I think. Fast, hard. What would Kinley do? I say the opposite thing.

"Both of us." I smile like it's brilliant of me.

She jerks from me. Her candy pretty face sucks on mine for trick. I hold myself. Think of romantic wanderings through the Gate, sex in the Kitty Wagon in the back. That Fish's lips. *Mmm.*

She weakens, nods. Her green eyes, wet for a moment, dry & harden to our task.

"Why didn't he kill you?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"*Tell me.*"

Now sad as burying her first hamster, says, "He told me he was wrong about me. I didn't want it enough."

"Want what? Death?"

She nods.

Wow.

I remember to breathe, & tell her to breathe, & bring her into the mirror-lined bathroom so we can touch up each other's makeup which, other than clit-licking, is how I think quickest to renew our nutty bond. She calms, we make out a little, I wish I could borrow Kinley's pretty cock to fuck some sense into this girl. Ah, well, can't chance that Kinley's cock would like it too much. Or that I wouldn't want to give his cock back.

These parties appeal to different kinds, sort of a wide-ranging lunacy. It's not just the rich & pretty & well-drugged. That said, nobody's allowed weapons, & behavior that gets too gangish or thuggish leads to ejection. From what I've seen, ejection is one-time only & done, & it hurts.

So there's the million-dollar skanks & the booty-shakers. Bored suburban wives. Some fruity *artiste* types. No open sex; that's what the empty rooms are for. No out & out rape either; the men, even Kinley, get a little shot on entry. Dulls the worst of their cocks' impatient or twisted wants, just enough.

She leads me to where he was, out by the Olympic-sized pool. BBQ pits. Loud, tuneless techno. But jolly. A sort of frazzled jolly. I saw too many faces I knew or vaguely knew.

They wanted the real Killer.

"Look! It's him!" she screeching whispers in my ears.

I look. Among the tight suits, the short hair, the long hair, the tattoos, the earrings, the laughter, that

whirring buzzing sense of many men in one place, both relaxed in mind & frenzied in cock, I look toward where she is pointing to a man who is for just an elongated moment one more pretty boy, one more cock among cocks but then, oh no, *oh shit no*, this whole fevered dream of a night & the life I've been leading some years now crashes in my face & through my body as I fall near senseless into my friend's beautiful, slender, but surprisingly, happily, strong arms.

"It's him," I moan.

"Who?"

Jack. Fuck me twice. *Jack.*

xxxiv.

He looks at me the same time & everything falls away.

"Breathe, Christina."

"Huh?"

"*Breathe.* You're scaring me."

Oh. Shit. Fuck. A part of me is trying to cover the rest of which is trying to undress me for you knowing you haven't had better since me & what—wait—

"What?"

She's scared of you. Well, she's always been scared of you but she likes the thrill & danger of it. Or something.

"Why are we here again, Kinley?"

"Is that his name? The one looking at you. Damn, Christina."

"Yeah. Seriously. I mean, *no, fuck, what the fuck.*"

All this goes through my eyes mind mouth & body in about two seconds she finds herself drug off by Christina to a bedroom floor. Sounds of occupation on the bed above.

"*Christina.*"

"Is he the Killer?"

"I don't know. I think so."

The fucking in the bed gets louder. Moans are good cover.

"Did you see him kill anyone?"

"No. But he came out of the room. And later she didn't."

I have to decide. I don't know *how* to decide. Jack wasn't crazy. He wasn't even that interesting, especially in bed. I wasn't picky then, just a guy with a big cock & a small brain so I could forget about Kinley—

But Jack was special—and I was stupid to fuck up what he had with that girl Penelope—it's like I had to make everyone suffer like I was.

And his world was strangely intriguing. Like some sort of underground network. Mostly parties but not completely.

Now what. I get up. Watch the bleached blonde get the cream eaten out of her for a moment, then I walk back outside to him.

"Hi Jack."

"Christina. *Shit.*"

"Yah. Go figure. You here with Penny?"

"Um. No. She's at the hotel."

"And you?"

Jack laughs. His eyes darken. His face surrounds her, more fully & completely than it would seem possible, & silence, & just their breathing. Again. Again.

"I'm here to stop him."

I laugh. I explode. My tits would fall out of my dress if I didn't hang on 'em tight.

Jack stares at me. A nice millionaire's poolside. Pretty people all around.

What are we doing here, Kinley?

"I'm sorry, Jack."

He smiles stiffly. "Yah. Why are you here?"

"Same. Stop the party pooper."

His eyes are quickly remembering my body which is not much covered from a lot of good remembering so I retrieve my equally sexy & underdressed friend.

"Jack, this is."

"Hi Jack, I'm Is."

"Hi." They laugh. Shit. He does that. One tooth too many & you're liking him. I try to remember the bad parts. Um, mostly, the cocaine & suicidal unhappiness?

Oh sure. Them.

So I pull Jack & Is both into the bedroom. Happily, the previous couple had cummed, paid up, & gone.

"OK, Jack, here it is. Kinley & I find the Killer, stop him, & get our freedom back."

"Kinley? Your teacher?" He laughs hard & cruelly.

"Yah. *Fuck*, dude."

He stares at me. "You were a stupid coked up cunt bitch who helped me fuck my life. What part of that would you like own?"

For a moment I think of Kinley talking about the Gate, about origins & secrets of the world, & about how he is so happy to be sharing them with me, & I finally, fully, gather my shit up & say: quietly: softly: finally: *fuck you*.

But instead of whatever else I'd do if I wasn't me, I grab her hand & his hand & drag them out to the poolside crowd of puffy pretties.

"I've caught this party's Killer. This pretty book right here. Now everyone give him a good hand." And they do. They applaud him even as he might be *the* Killer.

I bring them back to my room, swear them to screaming to stay still, they do, I come back with Kinley, my adrenaline gone so I'm really surrendered to it all—

"Jack."

"Kinley."

"Hi. I'm Is."

"Is."

"Yah. Let's go with it."

"You're not the Killer, Jack?"

"No!"

"Is says you are."



"Is? Who?"

"Her."

"What kind of name is Is?"

"What kind of name is Jack the fucking party slut killer?"

"No. Fuck! What kind of name is 'Stina the party whore skank who ruined my life?"

Pulling them off each other, Kinley half-considers letting them fuck their way out of it. Only half. Getting her this tame & unferal was too much work to lose.

Kinley finally makes Christina & Is leave. Hates to do it. Wishes Maya was there to help. But yah, OK.

He & Jack finally sit together on cum-stained bedclothes.

"Where do we start?"

Jack sighs. "I don't know that we do. She loves you. She's with you. I don't care. I don't object. I wish you good."

"But?"

His face darkens. "But nothing."

"Penny?"

"She's fine. Good."

"Where?"

"Hotel."

"While you chase the Realist Killer?"

Jack stands up. "She's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yah. Something. I'm not sure."

There's a pause.

"Did she leave you, Jack?"

"No."

"How long has it been since you've seen her?"

He looks down between his knees.

"I don't know."

Kinley starts to ask another when Jack interrupts. "It was at one of these parties."

He thinks. They were sitting together in the second row of the Nada Film School theater, as the midnight showing of **RemoteLand** began.

Her hand in his. Penny's. Penelope's. His Penelope. Whatever had been, the ships overhead, Christina, the Bridge of Glass. The S&G Pizza window he'd crawled out of. The fact of him waking up there in the first place. The gunshot that had waked him.

Her hand in his. Blonde, green-eyed. Hair in a braid down her back. She's wearing a long violet dress. For him.

She'd come with him. Found him. *Was with him.*

The movie shows its classic car crash in reverse opening scene as Jack wonders if he is dead.

"No. It was earlier. At a movie theater. The party was in the film."

Kinley is now sitting close to Jack who's sweating, eyes closed, rocking.

I'm holding your hand but your attention is on the film screen. My hand slides along you, cupping your breast, stroking, stroking, you smile that soft smile of yours, like you are enjoying, but you keep watching too. *Why am I doing this?* I try to watch too. I try to remember who I am.

The party in the film was very strange. Not too many men & women among the other kinds of aliens there. There's no dialogue, just very eerie & erotic music. I look at you again & you are watching almost like you aren't there.

Your hand in mine & I have to know what you are seeing, Penny.

"I followed her in."

"To the party in the film?"

Jack nods.

"This is all **RemoteLand** to you, Jack?"

He looks up at Kinley, sharply.

"Yes. I'm trying to find Penny & bring her back to the theatre where we were."

Kinley tells Jack to wait & he goes to find Christina, who is just at the door, eavesdropping.

"He's nuts, Kinley."

Kinley nods slowly.

"Isn't he?"

"Where's Is?"

"Oh. Well, she was very spooked so she left."

"To where?"

Christina looks vague. "I don't know? She was spooky. Cute but too spooky."

Kinley's look is plain. "The Gate-Keeper is doing all this."

"Aren't we trying to help him?"

Kinley grabs Christina's hand hard. "We're going. Now."

"Wait! What about Jack?"

"Do you really care?"

"Kinley, just stop. Talk to me."

Kinley's look is twisted & weird.

"*We're in his film.* I don't understand it."

Christina goes back into the room where Jack is sitting, slumped over, head in hands.

"Jack."

"Xtina."

"No. You know that."

He smiles.

"We're leaving. Come with us."

"I can't. Penelope."

She looks back at Kinley.

"Kinley agrees with you. We're in this film. Why would Penny have come here?"

"I don't know. We were watching it. Holding hands."

Christina drags Kinley back into the hallway.

“OK. Let’s go.”

“And Jack?”

“How do we help him?”

“The Gate-Keeper has his reasons.”

“We haven’t found his Killer.”

“Yes, we did. Jack.”

“He didn’t kill anyone!”

“No, but I think he’s the one the Gate-Keeper wants.”

Kinley goes in one last time & sits next to Jack.

“You can leave me,” Jack says. “You owe me nothing.”

“I think you’re who the Gate-Keeper wants. I think I know why.”

“Because I chased after Penny?”

“Yes. He lured her in because he knew you would come.”

“Why?”

Kinley smiled. “Because Christina & I are leaving. Because Maya is gone. Because it’s your turn.”

The two men shake, hold their grip a long time. “Where will you two go?” Jack asks.

Kinley laughs. “First motel down the road.”

xxxv.

“Cut!” I cry.

“Cut?” Jack & Kinley say same time.

“Just kidding. Come in here, Christina & Is.”

They’re looking at me. “Yah, it’s me. The Gate-Keeper’s boss, you could say.”

Since there’s one big bed, they sit alongside it. Kinley, Christina, Jack, Is.

I look at Is. Nice fucking tits. A little too peroxide for me. Too much makeup. Still. She blushes at me. That helps.

“You need a name.”

“Is?”

“That was a bad joke. But . . .”

I put my finger on my chin.

“Could be Is is short for Isis? The ancient Egyptian goddess?”

Is, or Isis, smiles. “There. That’s the first fully right thing I’ve done on these pages for a little while.”

Kinley extends his hand to me. “I’m Kinley.”

“I’m Raymond. Hi.”

Christina smirks at me. I nod.

Jack is simply glowering at me. “I disappeared from this story for hundreds of pages. I’m back. Fine. It’s a little rough, but it’s OK. You did your research.”

“After finding I couldn’t just wing it.”

“Yes.”

“What then? What’s wrong?”

"I was rushing, stumbling."

Kinley talks. "What can we do?"

"It's not that. I just felt I had to stop the narrative & say, apologize."

Kinley nods. Is is looking at me curiously.

"You're the writer?"

"The Author. Yah."

"Why are you apologizing to us? Don't we do whatever you want?"

"Yes. But."

"But?"

"Look, it's a collaboration. I try to write what is meaningful & sensible."

She looks harder at me.

"Do you want to fuck me?"

"No. Yes. No more than every other pretty girl in a short dress."

"Or long," smirks Christina.

"Why am I here?" Is asks.

"You were a minor character helping Christina."

"With a little girl-on-girl action as a bonus?" Smirks herself.

Damn smirks are sexy.

Kinley nods like I spoke.

"Now what?" asks Is. "Kinley & Christina are leaving. Jack is looking for Penny. What about me?"

"What would you like?"

"Why is my name Isis?"

"Your parents were professors."

"Where are they?"

"Back East?"

"Do they know where I am?"

"Not really. You left home when you were 16."

"Why? Were they abusive?"

"No. They loved you but they didn't give you the answers you needed."

"Meaning?"

"They were skeptics. More or less happy not knowing why."

"Why?"

"Yah. Why. Why are we here? And: where are we from? And: what are we supposed to be doing?"

"They cared. They just didn't know."

"Did they love me?"

"Yes. And your sister."

"Where is she?"

"She died very young. She got sick. Then you came."

"So that's why they are as they are?"

"Yes."

I'm about to give Is some nice jeans and a top when she shakes her head. "Do I like sex?"

"When it's good. You're a little lazy."

She nods. "Do I love Christina?"

"Christina is your friend. You haven't had too many. She makes you feel like you're worth something more than tits & ass."

Christina nods silently.

She also thinks you're hot as fuck.

Christina nods again.

"Anyway, you know she belongs to somebody."

"That obvious?" Christina complains & pouts. Sexier than her smirk. Kinley nods.

"Why did I come to this party?"

"You came out to California looking for sun & God. You weren't a virgin but you'd only been with boys. And they were fairly quick."

"Too quick."

"Yes. Of course. So I met a man?"

"Well, you ended up at a sort of commune."

"Was I a virgin? *Decide.*"

"Yah. Though you'd sucked a lot of cock. Seemed like the same thing only more?"

"So I was stupid."

"You just wanted life to get interesting."

"So . . . commune?"

"Yah, it was up north."

"How north?"

"Washington State."

Kinley & Christina & Jack all exchange looks. "Christa."

"Who?" asks Is.

"Tell," they say.

"She lived on a commune. She met Bowie the spy & he took her with him."

Christina snickers. "His harem."

"You're a harem of one, Christina," Kinley says. She laughs, as rarely.

"So I was on a commune?"

"Yah. For awhile."

"Did they treat me nice?"

"Lots of group sex & light philosophy."

"Why did I leave?"

"You were affected by Christa leaving. People tried to forget about her. You hadn't known her well but you were upset that nobody would talk about how she left or why."

"So what did I do?"

"You announced you were leaving & why. Gave a big speech at the communal dinner."

"What did I say?"

"This is my last meal with all of you. I'm leaving in the morning. But I'm not running away like Christa. Nobody is coming for me."

"We haven't talked about Christa much, have we? Like she was very important to us, & now she never was?"

"I left home because people didn't deal with shit. Go into things too much. Pain. Why I ended up here because it seemed it was different here."

"Since I'm going, it's not for me to decide what you do. And I still care for you all. I just have to go."

"And what did they do to me?"

"They would have kept you, even hurt you to do it."

"But?"

"Someone helped you."

"Who?"

"Helped you escape."

"Who?"

"Been helping you all your life."

"Who?"

"Her name is like a long *hmmm* or a series of click-clicks & noises."

"What do I call her?"

"Samantha."

Again, Kinley & Christina & Jack look at each other. "*Maya*."

"Who?"

"Samantha helped her too."

"So there to here?"

"You hitchhiked for awhile. Sucked a few cocks for rides. Carried a knife against more. Sometimes didn't use the knife."

"But here?"

"Yah, that part about wanting to meet the real Killer."

"Not him?" She points at Jack. We all laugh. Including Jack. He stops first.

"You were just tired. Feeling numb. Chasing the Killer, instead of maybe being his victim, maybe not, was exciting. You became obsessed."

"Am I still?"

I look at her seriously. "I don't know. This is the collaborative part of this book. Do you want to keep on chasing the Killer?"

Her eyes are a striking grey like cat's fur. Pretty, despite the makeup.

"Not for him to kill me. How would that help me if I really want answers?"

"No Heaven?"

She shakes her head. "My parents are right to look for meaning in this world, not beyond it."

"But?"

"This world is more than they could imagine."

I look at Jack. "And you?"

"Me? I'm looking for Penny."

"Can Isis help you?"

They look at each other.

"You were right. I didn't want death enough," she says, almost shyly.

"It wasn't you, Isis, it was me. I chickened out on fucking you. I was lost. I needed to feel something but despair."

I ask: "Can you two look for Penny without fucking each other along the way?"

They nod, Isis more enthused than Jack.

"You'll find her, Jack."

"Yah. Or you'll forget my story for a couple of years, & 300 pages."

Isis takes Jack's hand, gently. "He won't. This scene is his apology. And me. I won't fuck you but I will keep your spirits up." Jack smiles, mostly at her face. Isis nods to me, & she's wearing a set of tight blue jeans & a tight shapely pink blouse.

"Better?" She nods. Jack stares at me.

I look at Christina & Kinley. "I think you miss Maya."
 "Does she remember us?" Christina's half-serious.
 "Enough. Anyway, you know where to find her."
 "Boat Wagon?" Christina says, & Kinley looks positively hopeful.
 "Say your goodbyes. Then through that door."

Christina & Jack stand & face each other. "I'm sorry, Jack. I hope you find her."
 Jack smiles. "We'll meet again at some point. It's *that* kind of book." They laugh.
 Christina hugs Jack & then faces Isis. "Well done, sister. The rest of us sometimes aren't much more than T & A."
 Isis laughs. "No, you're not. I'm not either now."

Hand in hand, opening the door, Christina & Kinley walk through. The Tangled Gate so tall & massive. No door behind them 't'all.

Jack & Is walk through that same door back to the party.

xxxvi.

"Rebecca."
 "Raymond."
 "That went OK."
 She laughs. "Yes."
 "
 "Yes?"
 "And this?"
 "This?"
 "I don't know. I seem to want another scene with us."
 "OK."
 "I'm uncertain next."
 "That's OK."
 "
 "Is this still fun? Big fun?"
 "Yes. When I devote righteous hours to it, like tonight. Not try to pack too much into an hour. It deserves better."
 "Yes, it does."
 "Help me."
 "You don't need any. You know this."
 "Help me anyway."
 "OK, Raymond."

xxxvii.

Toby hops off the Black Dog Diner & offers his hand to Jazz. She steps down safely, but keeps his hand. He smiles a little bit, just.

The air smells pleasantly salty as they assess their where. A seaside village, not much of one. They walk through its not-much main street to arrive at the water. Still hands grasped. Toby trying to sort wanting to protect her from wanting to fuck her in every alleyway they pass.



No promising boats in the harbor. Toby begins to swear soundlessly but Jazz just dazzles him with her smile & leads him away from the harbor. The shore is more rocky than sandy but they slowly make their way.

“It’s OK, Toby.”

And it is. There is a small cove they come to & a pretty if odd sight. A small boat pulled up, wheels on its corners for land travel. ’Tis waiting.

Two black Kittees, bloo-eyed, red collars, white paws, are in the driver’s seat up front. Between them, a beautiful red-lipped Goldfish. All looking toward the hand-holding Jazz & Toby as they slowly approach.

Not a word as Jazz leads them right up to the Boat Wagon & they both climb in the back seat. Jazz smiling even more as she buckles them both in. Kisses his cheek, one, the other.

“Safety first, Toby.”

Finally, he smiles too. All this? Why not. Better than the UFOs.

But then Toby unbuckles & gets out. Gives the Boat Wagon a strong push into the water, then splashes & clambers back in. His smile to Jazz, to the Kittees & the Goldfish, is big, genuine, happily goofy.

The Kittees paddle them steadily out to sea, never a word. But the Goldfish turns to look back at them with a pretty smile.

“Are you comfortable?”

Toby & Jazz nod.

“It’s a nice trip.”

“You know where we’re going?” asks Toby. Jazz’s small soft hand hasn’t left his for a moment.

“To the Island?”

Toby nods. “Do you know why? Did they send you?”

“You needed a ride,” says the Goldfish. Sort of an answer.

Toby nods.

The day passes peacefully, the ocean calm, the steady paddling.

Toby dozes in Jazz’s arms for a long time, but starts awake to black clouds above & wild & wilder waves. He panics but Jazz holds him close.

“It’s OK. Look!” She points to a figure in the sky fast approaching.

It’s a . . . a . . . Sea Dragon? It’s OK?

He is impossibly big & yet when he is close none of the others fear. Lands on the sea close & gently swings his tail toward them. Despite the raising waves, the Kittees are able to paddle onto his tail & on up, & up, & up, to arrive on his great back.

“Let’s go, friends!” he says in a crackly but surely laughing voice, his wings beating faster & faster, *thwup! thwup! thwup!*, up into the skies, not slowing a moment until they burst through the stormy clouds to lovely sunshine.

"Thank you," whispers Toby, so very quietly.
 "My pleasure," growls Calgary the Sea Dragon pleasantly.

xxxviii.

Bowie & Iris have not returned to the mansion & its party yet. Iris is very patient. *Very.*

"Bowie."
 "Iris."
 "Very patient, Bowie?"
 He nods.
 "We don't have to go back."
 "Yah, we do."
 "You're not going to lose me."
 "We don't know that."
 "Look at me. Now."

They are sitting on the hill near the mansion, gotten no further away nor closer back.

Iris makes them face each other, cross their legs to twine them, wraps her arms around Bowie's tall, lanky torso. Hugs him, & more, & more, till he hugs her back. He does, helpless to Iris's touch.

"Tell me a story, Iris."
 "A story?"
 "What you were like when you were small. Who you were."
 "Why?"
 "So I know this isn't a good bad dream. So I can quiz the real Iris later if you're just her simulacra in my drugged or passed out mind. In some alley or prison."
 Iris laughs but not too much. She closes her eyes. Bowie nods, closes his.

"When I really think about it, deeply, I can sort of remember all my lives, all the me's scattered through the centuries."
 Bowie nods, breathes slowly.

"It's like we live lives that are different but the same."
 "Like what?"
 "The hole in our bedroom walls, in dreams. The caves & tunnels under the Tangled Gate. The Creatures."
 "But I'm not with all of you."
 Iris laughs. "We've already talked about this."
 Bowie sighs. Iris is trying to cheer him up. If she can't do it, it's not possible.
 Opens his eyes. "OK. How do we do this?"
 Opens her eyes. "You're ready?"
 He sighs. "I can't lose you, Iris, no matter what my father does."
 Iris smiles for every charm she's worth as she stands, reaches hands to Bowie's, pulls him up in a nice steady swoop.

Hands tightly clasped, they walk down the hill toward the big house.

xxxix.

30,000 feet above the Earth, floating along on unimaginably powerful engines, directed by great wings, 100 or more people sitting quietly in the half-lit plane's cabin, two people steering the flying ship. Amazing, commonplace.

Writing this book, I've got more or less a third of its pages with me, in a smaller notebook than the big one all the pages live in. Modern commercial air travel necessitates that one pack neatly & with much space economy. Decreases the annoyances when passing through security, when living several hours fairly tightly with so many others.

Many people sleep, since it's a smooth travel most of the way. Warm in cabin. TV screens facing each seat. Soda & snacks.

Is this part of the narrative? In a way. That is, I've wondered at these authorial pauses before, & concluded they belong as much as the rest.

Nearing 9 years writing this book, 2378 hand-written pages. Most published in my journal *The Cenacle*, read on my radio show "Within's Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution," excerpted in *Scriptor Press Sampler Annual*, online at *The ElectroLounge*, read for years at the Jellicle Literary Guild meetings.

Began this book while living in Seattle, then Portland, then home come to (when there) metro-Boston.

But not writing for more than this, for money, or greater distribution. For fun, heavy & light.

What then? Something about defined, contained moments. Low airy hum in the cabin, miles passed in seconds. Many kinds of lights, power lights, indicator lights, reading lights. Yellow, orange, blue. Countless little TV screens, all different.

Grey rug, textured like tiny squares. Sleeping faces, staring ones, watching ones, reading ones. Airline is called JetBlue; I don't know why.

I'm listening to the "Hippie Vibes Show," #21, on my iPod, Polly, B-52s just finishing, had Polly since I'd guess about 2003, nearly 12 years? Wow.

My sneakers are old, worn, but still wearable. My blue jeans new. My eyeglasses, Lennonspecs, got in 1997, over 17 years ago, at an optometrist shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Moved with me out West, back East, out West again, back East again, attended 11 Burning Man Festivals I went to, 1999-2009, & I hope 2015 Firefly Fest up in Vermont this coming July.

Things I wear, carry along, like this pen, traces to 1981 & Hartford, CT, Espresso black pens, look different now, different company makes them, write the same, more or less.

My green cell phone, Gumbee, had now 4 or 5 years, repaired once—my Thoughts Pad, full of writings like this, & *Many Musics* poetry, yellow pads in it, I think I've had it maybe 20 years—

In my bag, my MacBook Pro, Eurydice, about 8 years in my possession, quite a few repairs, still rocking, still very important to my presswork—

"Lifevest under your seat
Chaleco Salvavidas Debajo De Su Acento"

Coca-cola
 cherry zero
Family Guy
 Fynn McCool.
 Calorie Free Cola with Cherry Flavor
 and other natural flavors
 E V E N M O R E S P A C E
 Correction: EVEN MORE S P A C E

Calgary the Sea Dragon flying the Boat Wagon safely to the Island

Bowie & Iris walking toward the door, hands clasped

Kinley & Christina entering the Tangled Gate, approaching the Fountain for a drink

Maya purring in her sleep amongst her many Creature friends

Peaceful till landing in 30-45 minutes,
 high above the continent—

~~"Diamond Lill, Diamond Lill,"~~

xl.

Genny tosses & turns in her Queenly bed in the Castle on the Island. Her various witchly girls sleep twined with her. Naked, by the Queen's insist.

The red-haired one her favorite. They spent a lot of hours tonguing deep between each other's legs. Keeps this girl shaven clean for her preference.

Genny isn't staying, & she sure as hell isn't going without Preacher. But when they are in his bed, she's slow, nearly cold.

"What is it, Genny?"

I'm so sorry.

"I love you. I'm sorry I brought you here."

"What is it? Why can't I be with him? *Tell me.*"

"I don't know."

I grasp your slender torso by my fingernails driving into your shoulders.

"Please."

"Tell me. Or I'll send you out like the rest I don't want anymore."

"No."

"Tell me."

"Your food. It must be."

"I'm poisoned?"

"I guess so. It's your role."

I roll off the bed, plenty big for the nest of girls I keep, or kept.

"Tell me."

"You turn away the King & he finds the demon girl."

I want to scream but don't. Think, Genny. *Think*.

"How long?"

"M'lady?"

"Till it wears off. You'll fetch me clean food. Dispose of the poison."

She makes to protest. I shake my head.

"Do you love me?"

Blue eyes down, perky nipples hard on her pretty high breasts. I can taste her wetness across the room.

"Yes," she says barely.

"Will you do as I say?"

She nods. Smiles. I feel a cock I don't have harden on me for that smile. Press on.

"When we leave, we'll take you too."

"Take?"

"Do you want to come with Preacher & me?"

"Come?"

I nod. "Preacher used to have a harem. I don't imagine he'd mind tasting you along. *Taking*, I mean," & I smirk. I feel better already.

"The King?" She does the shy demur thing again.

I crawl onto the bed, right on top of her, kiss her tongue deep, slowly, & again, & again. Twine our fingers between her thighs & she moans for me. I whisper barely not silence. "Don't . . . you . . . want . . . him . . . to *fuck* . . . your . . . wet . . . tight . . . cunt?"

She orgasms, & again, & again as my fingers drive into her.

A yes, then.

To cover our intent to go, we continue to do everything as we have. Merry is but one of my several girls & they all turn at pleasing their Queen. Yet, & still, my visits to the King are cold. I notice him more often around that girl. Sweet face, sweet ass. I'd like her for my harem. Mostly I want her out of his bed.

Merry brings me what she is able, small fruits & nuts. I half-starve but the poison leaves me.

Comes a night I am not appointed to visit. She & I leave the nest of girls, separately, & down the silent hallway to his room.

Empty.

"He keeps her elsewhere," she whispers.

"Where?"

Merry looks at me like this will end her to say, like she has not trusted my will even now. Breathes hard, takes my hand, leads me to a far room. Locked.

Merry smiles at me, twitches?

"Go."

"You're coming?"

"No."

"Why?"

"This is my world. Not yours. The Gate-Keeper is letting you go."

I start to talk but her finger to lips she pushes door open for me.



Desiree Madrid

She's face down in his pillows, sweet ass high, him entering her from behind, slow deep, slower deeper. *Slower, deeper.*

Doesn't feel me behind him at first, my arms around him, my breasts pressed against him. For a moment makes to pull out but I say: "No. Harder."

So he begins to fuck her harder & harder, her moans giving way to cries to crying as he fucks her harder & harder. "Now cum for me," I whisper, still wrapped around him. He moans too. "*Again.*" He cries & cums again. "*Again!*" He fucks her 'till he is spent & she is passed out.

"My Queen."

"*Genny.*"

"This role."

"No. That ass."

"Yes. No."

"*Yes.*"

"What now?"

"We leave."

His look leaps from shameful to hope.

"They'll let us."

He nods.

"Dress."

He has only a regal red robe.

"Fine. It'll do."

I look back as we leave at her fine fucking ass.

"Miss that?"

He smiles, smacks my ass. Good thing I lost a couple of pounds starving out that poison. Then again, no. *He loves me.*

xli.

Self. Ralph. Cordelia. Holding hands, walking outside. Had to pass through the Hotel Noah first, of course, it containing within it the Nada Theater or Film School.

But now outside. A city street. Still pretty dark. Street lamps, wind-blown detritus. Calm. Still. They walk.

Come to a nearby establishment. Sign atop door says, "Luna T's Cafe." There are unlit neon signs in the window. A poster: "Noisy Children, Back at T's! Fridays & Saturdays, 9:30 p.m. No cover, as always!"

They sit, the three of them, her in the middle of course, on the low stone wall in front of Ts. Holding hands. She shivers.

"Do you want to go back to the Theatre?" one asks her.

She shivers, shakes her head.

"What then?"

She looks up & down the street, dark, empty, streetlamps, smiles sharply, nods to her knees. "Take turns down there, warming me."

Which to go first? Well, he wants to leave us for Maya, so he should know what he's leaving.

She has no panties on so just a matter of her spread thighs & positioning himself between. She isn't very wet at first, being cold, so he nods to his partner to kiss her & get some action going up there. And . . . better. That & his tongue's persist. He laps her to a nice small squeaking orgasm, then they trade turns. Second orgasm's bigger. Feeling warmer now, she's pleased.

She takes her turn on knees before each of them but playfully won't finish either one. "Take care of each other. I'll watch," she says, very pleased.

Were they not best friends, in acid & beyond, was she not the first girl they ever loved who was also real, & let herself be touched, had she not horndogged them out painfully much, well, who knows? One gingerly kneels before the other, looks at her pretty face, she licks her lips at him smiling, & he kisses the other's cock. Kisses, licks, uses his fingers gently. His friend surprises both of them & moans. Takes it in slowly, like he's seen her do, to him, to both of them. Then opens his mouth & throat & closes his eyes & pushes forward, sucking his friend's cock in, & in, & in, sucking harder & harder & harder 'till his friend is thrashing & she is moaning too, to help, & he cums, & he sucks, & he cums, & he drinks, & he cums, & he drinks it all, sucking & sucking until he has it all & they are both shaking & shaking.

Looks up finally.

"You OK?"

"Yah. Thanks. You?"

"Yah. Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"My turn?"

Both smile as awkwardly as possible. Love each other. Mostly, *love her unreasonably*.

"Yah. Let's."

xlii.

[There is a handsome blonde boy I am new friends with. He is a very important friend to me & it appears we are going to long travel together.

[I'm at a counter & the strange girl finally appears, but I forget where we're going & hurry back to him to ask, he click-clicks & noise-noises, no *really*?

[We are close—lovers? No. I wonder that & conclude: No.

[We get on the bus together, he has no bags or really anything, I have my knapsack, notebooks, pads, brushes, pens, the single small canvas I allowed myself.

[We sit across the aisle from each other, smiling, but shy. I think: did he try to kiss me? Did I at least get to know if I wanted more? No, I'm unkissed still.

[His smile over to me grows heavy-lidded & he naps. Sleeps deeply, mouth open a bit, pink tongue poking out over his teeth. I feel it more clearly now. The curiosity. The tingle. *The want*.

[But I draw myself instead. The layers of clothes I wear to shroud my breasts, my body. I touch it at night, my eyes closed, exploring, what feels nice, what feels *really* nice.

[But it's not enough really. I can't surprise myself. I can't romance myself. I can only get relief.

[So I follow him. He smiles, seems to wait for me. I raise my finger to wait, he nods. I hurry back to the Queen's room. Rucksack, notebooks, canvas.

[I follow him around that strange corner & feel different. Older? How? Hurry after him until we get to the place we got on this bus.

[The Queen would touch me in ways that blurred me with pleasure. I loved her, a little, but knew she yearned the King. She taught me to make her moan, & I would, but she would moan for him.

[My next drawing I have fewer clothes on. I always seem to do this. Undress myself, picture by picture.

[He does not stir. He is a boy, a pretty boy, not like the Queen yearns. Had I gone with them!

[We arrive to a city, a big city, & the Gate-Keeper has more cameras on us now, following us from the cavernous subterranean bus station. He holds my hand as we find the escalator, as boys & men look at me from all sides, look at him too.

[Through the shops, out the glass door, onto the street, hands clasped tighter. I let the Gate-Keeper's cameras lead us, he is patient, showing us walking street after crowded street, letting his cameras lose us, find us again, focusing on his wondering face, keeping away from my impatient one.

[The cameras follow us into a hotel, darkly lit, wooden, quite old, up flight after flight, me leading, finally to a floor, a door, & inside a very big room, maybe it was many ones back once.

[We meet the friends we've been coming to. Mostly boys hardly men. They fawn over him. Do they want to lie with him? Does he know how?

[There is one among them of substance. He's the chief poet in their clan. His books of poetry lie around this big room, among its crates & old cushions, next to its elaborate stereo & jazz records.

[I pick one, let its pages open. Lines:

How old is the sky?

*What do penguins like to do
with refrigerators?*

My eyes are blue. I love Mac and Cheese.

Pages on:

*Before five went to school.
first time.
Cried for an hour, looked
at fish.
At twelve, it will
happen someday.*

"That's his second book. Nobody liked it. His first was great. It's why we came to him. And his third is great too. You gotta be loyal."

"You're a . . . girl . . . too?"

She nods. "I figured you needed a friend. They've kind of taken yours."

"Oh! Him. We haven't. We don't."

"But you like him?"

"I guess. We've traveled here together. He seems kind of innocent."

She laughs. Not meanly, but I guess I get her point.

We're sitting against a wall while my boy & the others & the chief poet figure out what jazz record will make them most excited.

"Have you . . . with one of them?"

"Just him. I think I was his first girl."

"Oh."

She laughs. "I'm glad it was him. We taught each other. He was very gentle. 'Till I wanted more."

"Will he want me to?"

"I don't think so. That second book. That was when we were all doing stuff. When we stopped, he wrote his third book. It was much better for everyone."

"Oh."

[I wonder why I am here. What does the Gate-Keeper intend for me?]

"Would you like to see me with her?" asks Cordelia with her strange smile.

Self & Ralph say nothing.

"I'm serious. I think we three need a little adventure before we let you go chasing after Maya."

"Is this so you can find the Gate-Keeper finally?"

"No. Maybe. She's cute."

"Are you tired of us?"

"No."

"What then?"

Cordelia closes her eyes, her hands each holding one of theirs, either side of her. Holding gently. Speaks softly & slowly. "I'm not sure what I am or what I want. But you two are my best friends & I want to keep you until I can't. Can we go?"

They nod. What else?

To be continued in Cenacle | 93 | June 2015

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Notes on Contributors

Algernon Beagle lives in Bags End. He is the long-time editor of *Bags End News*. His writings were last in *The Cenacle* in issue 42 | October 2000. Welcome back!

Charlie Beyer lives in Idaho. His fine, frenzied prose is a regular treat in *The Cenacle's* pages. Talking of going back to Belize & Guatemala soon, to “write down the stories I have heard & the ones I’m going to make.” Can’t wait to read them, Charlie! More of his writings can be found at <http://therubyeye.blogspot.com>.

Joe Coleman lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. Coincident to the publication of this issue is Scriptor Press’s RaiBooks’ issue of Coleman’s first published book of poetry, *Kingdom of Clowns*. Bravo, Joe!

Zoe Cormier lives in London, England. She published *Sex, Drugs & Rock ‘n Roll: The Science of Hedonism & the Hedonism of Science* in 2014. She can be found online at <http://zoecormier.com>.

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830, & died there in 1886. She is rightly regarded as one of the world’s greatest poets. More of her wonderful poetry was reprinted as part of the 1999 Burning Man Books series, & can be found online at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/nobordersbookstore.html>

Judih Haggai lives at Kibbutz Nir Oz in Israel. Her fine poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*, & has been since issue 48 | April 2003. Eleven of this periodical’s twenty years! Wow! Her work can also be found online at: <http://tribes.tribe.net/poetryjams>.

Nathan D. Horowitz lives in Vienna, Austria. Chapters from his travel memoir *Nighttime Daydreams* regularly appear in this periodical. He says the next chapter is “one in which all hell breaks loose.” More of his work can be found online at: <http://www.scribd.com/Nathan%20Horowitz> and <http://lordarbor.bandcamp.com>.

Colin James lives in western Massachusetts, tho he is from the north of England near Wales. He saw this periodical online at issuu.com & decided to get in touch. His poems are a welcome new addition to these pages.

Desiree Madrid lives in San Marcos, Texas. We've been friends since 2002, but this issue marks her first time in *The Cenacle*. Her photograph appearing in these pages was taken in Nova Scotia.

Martina Newberry lives in Palm Springs, California. Her poetry last appeared in *Cenacle* | 89 | June 2014. I read her poems with total fascination; there is not another voice like hers. Her website is <http://rollwiththechanges.org>.

Tom Sheehan lives in Saugus, Massachusetts. His poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. And a lot of other places, too, if you take a look around for them.

Kassandra Soulard lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. We've worked on this periodical over many years & it is by her gifts for graphic arts & layout that it is the lovely thing you are looking at right now.

Raymond Soulard, Jr. lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. I went looking in my 1995 notebooks for what it was like when this periodical began. I was *so damned excited* to get a \$400 photocopier. I vowed to do each issue better & better learn how. I still vow. I'm still learning.

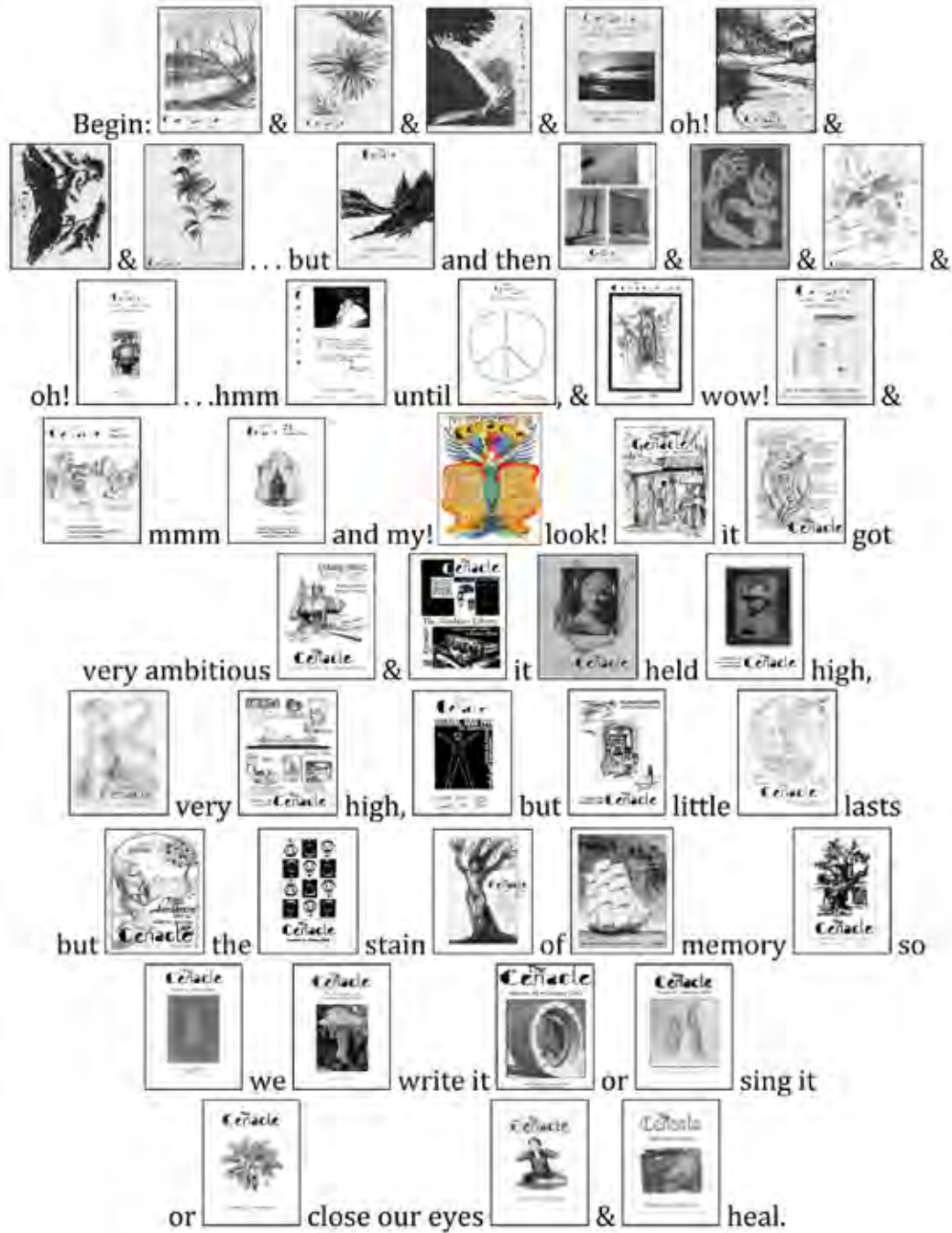
* * * * *



The Cenacle

1995-2015

... and still smokin'!



Continue:  & remember:  & new FX:  & sometimes crazy: 

& preach crazy:  & twas Seattle:  & a lovely alley: 

& oi wow!:  & redux:  & vizzzion:  & stark:  & my!: 

sweet:  & crazed:  & really pretty:  & & eeeee!: 

& secret treat:  & Catfish Rivers:  & & returns: 

& & arrive:  & night dream:  & day dream:  & collagees: 

& another secret treat:  & fannn-tastic:  & yowee:  & go!: 

& blow!:  & treat III (secret):  & kneel: 

& invert:  & gift:  & another: 

& tree!:  & Island:  & snow flakes: 

& finally 

